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MAY  
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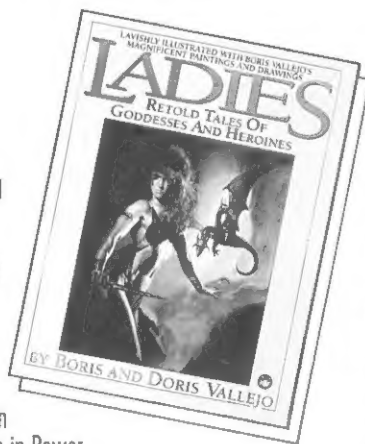


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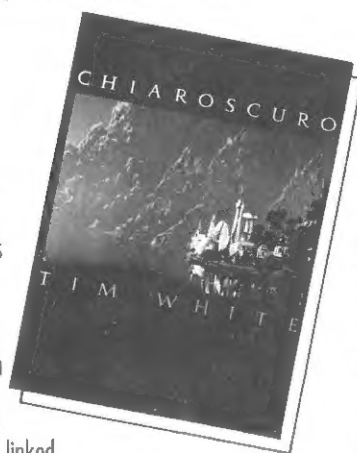


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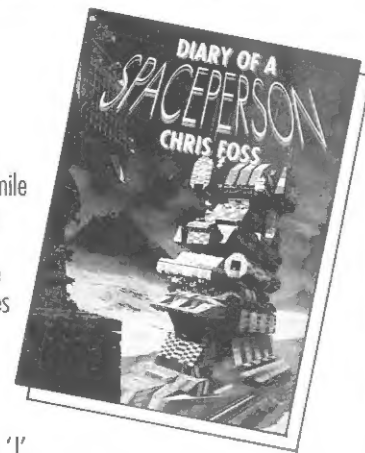


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# interzone

SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY

No 71

May 1993

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# Interface

## David Pringle

In our January 1993 issue we asked readers to vote on their favourite (and least favourite) stories published in these pages during 1992. Seventy-four ballots were received before the deadline, a sufficient number to give a valid result (we have found in the past that after about 50 ballots are counted the results change very little). As usual, we subtracted all negative mentions from positive ones to arrive at the following scores. Coincidentally, the "field" of stories last year was 74 strong, the largest quantity of fiction that readers have ever had to choose from in one of these polls. To save space, and embarrassment for those who came at the bottom, we give just the top 55 stories here. We hope to report on non-fiction and artwork preferences in the next issue.

### Story Poll Results, 1992

- 1) Garry Kilworth: The Sculptor 31
- 2) J.G. Ballard: The Message from Mars 28
- 3) Eugene Byrne: Cyril the Cyberpig 25
- 4) Greg Egan: Unstable Orbits in the Space of Lies 21
- 5) Diane Mapes: She-Devil 20
- 6=) Molly Brown: Agents of Darkness 19
- 6=) Kim Newman & Eugene Byrne: Tom Joad 19
- 8=) Eric Brown: Epsilon Dreams 18
- 8=) Storm Constantine: Priest of Hands 18
- 8=) Ian R. MacLeod: Returning 18
- 8=) Kim Stanley Robinson: Red Mars 18
- 8=) Ian Watson: The Coming of Vertumnus 18
- 8=) Ian Watson: Swimming with the Salmon 18
- 14=) Sarah Ash: Mothmusic 17
- 14=) Molly Brown: The Vengeance of Grandmother Wu 17
- 14=) Sean McMullen: Pacing the Nightmare 17
- 17=) Ian Lee: No Sense of Humour 16
- 17=) Diane Mapes: Nesting 16
- 17=) Nicholas Royle: The Cast 16
- 20) Julian Flood: The Jade Pool 15
- 21=) Brian Aldiss: Softly – As in an Evening Sunrise 14
- 21=) Greg Egan: The Hundred Light-Year Diary 14
- 21=) Kathleen Ann Goonan: Daydots, Inc. 14
- 24) Graham Joyce: The Careperson 13
- 25=) Barrington J. Bayley: Teatray in the Sky 12
- 25=) Paul Di Filippo: Destroy All Brains! 12
- 27=) David Garnett: Off the Track 11
- 27=) Elizabeth Hand: Engels Unaware 11
- 27=) William F. Temple: Testimony 11
- 30=) Greg Egan: Reification Highway 10
- 31=) Stephen Baxter: The Orchards of the Moon 9
- 31=) Robert Irwin: The Monastery of Alcobaca 9
- 31=) Gwyneth Jones: Blue Clay Blues 9
- 34=) Stephen Blanchard: The Fat People 8
- 34=) Paul Di Filippo: World Wars III 8
- 34=) Ian McDonald: The Best & the Rest of James Joyce 8
- 34=) Diane Mapes: The Big Yellow Car 8
- 34=) John Meaney: Spring Rain 8
- 39=) Brian Aldiss: Horse Meat 7
- 39=) Stephen Baxter: In the Manner of Trees 7
- 39=) Barrington Bayley: Why Live? Dream! 7
- 39=) Keith Brooke: The Queen of the Burn Plain 7
- 39=) Storm Constantine: Built on Blood 7
- 39=) Julian Flood: Children of a Greater God 7
- 39=) Ian McDonald: Big Chair 7
- 39=) Kim Newman: SQPR 7
- 47=) Michael Cobley: Corrosion 6
- 47=) Greg Egan: Before 6
- 49=) J.G. Ballard: A Guide to Virtual Death 5

- 49=) Keith Brooke: Jurassic and the Great Tree 5
- 49=) M. John Harrison: Anima 5
- 49=) Jonathan Lethem: The Speckless Cathedral 5
- 49=) Don Webb: Not of This World 5
- 49=) Ken Wisman: The Dumpster 5
- 55) John Sladek: Reinventing the Wheel 4

### Comments on the Poll Results

The remaining 19 stories all scored fewer than four points, we're sorry to say, with the least popular item ending up with -9. The very controversial story which we had feared would come bottom of the poll this year, Brian Aldiss's "Horse Meat," actually came 39th-equal with seven points (20 people voted for it, 13 against it).

Our heartiest congratulations to **Garry Kilworth** for topping the *Interzone* poll for the first time. Congratulations also to past-winners **J.G. Ballard** and **Greg Egan** for maintaining their form, and to those relatively new writers **Eugene Byrne**, **Diane Mapes** and **Molly Brown** for all doing so well.

It's interesting to compare our readers' preferences with comments which have appeared recently in *Locus: The Newspaper of the Science Fiction Field* (edited by Charles N. Brown from Oakland, California). In the February 1993 issue, *Locus*'s short-fiction reviewer, **Mark R. Kelly**, listed nine stories as his favourites from the entire sf field in 1992. We're delighted to note that three of them were *Interzone* stories: Brian Aldiss's "Horse Meat," J.G. Ballard's "The Message from Mars" and Greg Egan's "Unstable Orbits in the Space of Lies." For the record, the other six stories selected for special mention by Mark Kelly were by Alex Jeffers (from *Universe 2*), Nancy Kress, Ian R. MacLeod, Lucius Shepard, Michael Swanwick and Connie Willis (all from *Asimov's SF Magazine*). Thanks, Mark!

In addition to Mark Kelly's kind remarks, some 12 stories in all were selected from *Interzone* by various critics for mention in *Locus*'s "1992 Recommended Reading List." This score of a dozen puts us second only to *Asimov's* (which had an unbeatable tally of 34 stories nominated) and above such magazines as *F&SF* (10 stories), *Amazing* (seven stories), *Omni* (seven stories) and *Analog* (two stories) – all of which have much wider U.S. circulations than *Interzone* enjoys.

Apart from the three mentioned above by Mark Kelly, the remaining nine *Interzone* stories which found favour with *Locus* critics were: "The Gödel Sunflowers" by Stephen Baxter, "Priest of Hands" by Storm Constantine, "The Hundred Light-Year Diary" by Greg Egan, "Reification Highway" by Greg Egan, "The Best & the Rest of James Joyce" by Ian McDonald, "Big Chair" by Ian McDonald, "Returning" by Ian R. MacLeod, "She-Devil" by Diane Mapes and "The Coming of Vertumnus" by Ian Watson. We're grateful for all the positive mentions, but it's odd that they missed out on our winner, Garry Kilworth's "The Sculptor."

### Past Poll-Winners

For the information of newer readers, previous *Interzone* story-poll winners were as follows. (In the early days, when the magazine was quarterly, our polling periods were every four issues but did not cover exact calendar years; from the end of 1988, we "annualized" the poll.)

- 1982-3: Keith Roberts, "Kitemaster"
- 1983-4: Geoff Ryman, "The Unconquered Country"
- 1984-5: J.G. Ballard, "The Object of the Attack"
- 1985-6: Ian Watson, "The People on the Precipice"
- 1986-7: Richard Kadrey, "Goodbye Houston Street, Goodbye"
- 1987-8: David Brin, "The Giving Plague"
- 1988: Eric Brown, "The Time-Lapsed Man"
- 1989: Brian Stableford, "The Magic Bullet"



1990: Greg Egan, "Learning to Be Me"  
1991: Greg Egan, "The Infinite Assassin"

## New Nightmares

Watch out for a three-part Channel 4 Television series in the "Without Walls" arts slot on Tuesday nights, beginning 13th April 1993. With the overall title "New Nightmares," this promises to be one of the most serious treatments of science fiction that British television has yet given us.

Part One, "Nature Says No" (13th April at 9pm), is about science fiction and environmental themes, and interviewees include J.G. Ballard, Michael Crichton, James Lovelock and Kurt Vonnegut.

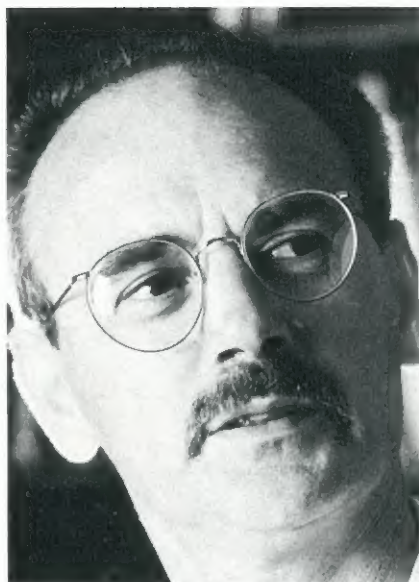
Part Two, "Man-Machine" (20th April), is about sf and the human-computer interface, featuring interviews with William Gibson, H.R. Giger, Marvin Minsky and Bruce Sterling.

Part Three, "Them" (27th April), is about sf and perceptions of the alien, with interviewees including Brian Aldiss, Martin Amis, Ballard and James Herbert.

Others to be featured, although we don't know which parts they will be in, include Greg Bear, John Brunner, Marge Piercy and film director Richard Stanley. Each programme is about 55 minutes long. This series sounds distinctly promising!

There will also be a major Channel 4 science-fiction movie season starting on 13th April (with *2001: A Space Odyssey* for openers, and 13 other films to follow) and at least one other documentary programme on an sf-related theme before the season comes to an end on 28th May 1993.

(David Pringle)



Garry Kilworth

season, but then their publication dates shifted apart (though Pizzey's *Morningstar* then appeared in the same month as Dave Gemmell's, which we didn't know about). But the books are so dissimilar in content, packaging and likely audience – dissimilar, in fact, in every respect save that *Morningstar* is the only logical title for each of them – that we didn't feel that any actual confusion would be caused. Nor has it been.

And things can only get worse: this June Gollancz are publishing Garry Kilworth's new novel *Angel*, while HarperCollins are publishing Barbara Taylor Bradford's new novel, you guessed it, *Angel*. Ramsey Campbell's *Angel* hasn't, as far as I know, been written yet. Millions of readers will be terminally confused. Or not. Personally, I think they'll be able to tell the difference.

Tell Langford that I'm still in exactly the same job as I've had since October '91. I'd tell him myself but, of course, I don't have time. Also, it was Barbados.

**Malcolm Edwards**  
HarperCollins, London

**Editor:** And I've just read a fine novel called *Angel* by Elizabeth Taylor (1957; but currently available in a Virago paperback edition). It's loosely based on the career of bestselling novelist Marie Corelli (and no, its author is not the Elizabeth Taylor). It's high time there was a moratorium on certain titles, among them *Beauty*, *Morningstar* and *Angel* (and *Mantis*, and half a hundred others...).

**Dear Editors:**  
I was intrigued by Elizabeth Counihan's story "Remember Me" (*IZ* 68), set at the Cretaceous-Tertiary boundary. It gives support to the argument that sf should be written by those outside the sciences concerned. Her point that

intelligent life, and even high culture, could have existed some sixty-five million years ago without leaving traces that we could recognize today is, so far as I can see, perfectly correct, yet not one that would occur to a geologist.

My objections to the story can mostly be dismissed as nit-picking, but there is one that raises a larger issue. Ms Counihan implies that the "Great Freeze" that killed off the dinosaurs was the result of greenhouse gases or radioactive pollution produced by the dinosaurs. There is increasing evidence for the "impact hypothesis" that the collision of an asteroid with the earth caused this extinction. The alternative theory, that it was the consequence of a series of vast volcanic eruptions that covered southern India in a pile of lava flows that is still a mile thick, is less likely, but still does not fit the story.

Is this distortion of the scientific evidence, merely to point a moral, acceptable artistic licence? I do not think it is. After all, if you want to warn about impending ecological crises, there are plenty of earlier such crises in human history and prehistory! Do other readers agree?

**David Stephenson**  
Keighley, Yorks

**Dear Editors:**

It has been a long time since a story has moved me as much as Astrid Julian's "Irene's Song" in *Interzone* no.69. I have been studying the history and situation in Yugoslavia in order to write an essay on the subject. Nothing I have read yet has brought home so clearly the suffering of the people. In the conflicting views of Tito's Partisans, nothing I have read points to the cruelty they perpetrated on the Germans. Although, knowing what humans are capable of, it is well believable.

**Susan Carr**  
London

**Editor:** The remainder of this issue's letter column consists of brief comments extracted from notes which accompanied votes in the readers' poll for 1992. Thanks to everybody for writing.

*Interzone's* strengths remain, firstly, its literary quality – there's usually at least one story per issue that could rank among the best modern short fiction of any type; secondly, the variety of work published, everything from genre sf to fantasy and near-mainstream; thirdly, the chance to watch new and newish writers develop alongside old hands (Stephen Blanchard, for example, seems interesting). OK, I could gripe about a few things – but that's what "variety" is all about. – **Tim Lees**, Manchester.

Continued on page 63

## Interaction

**Dear Editors:**

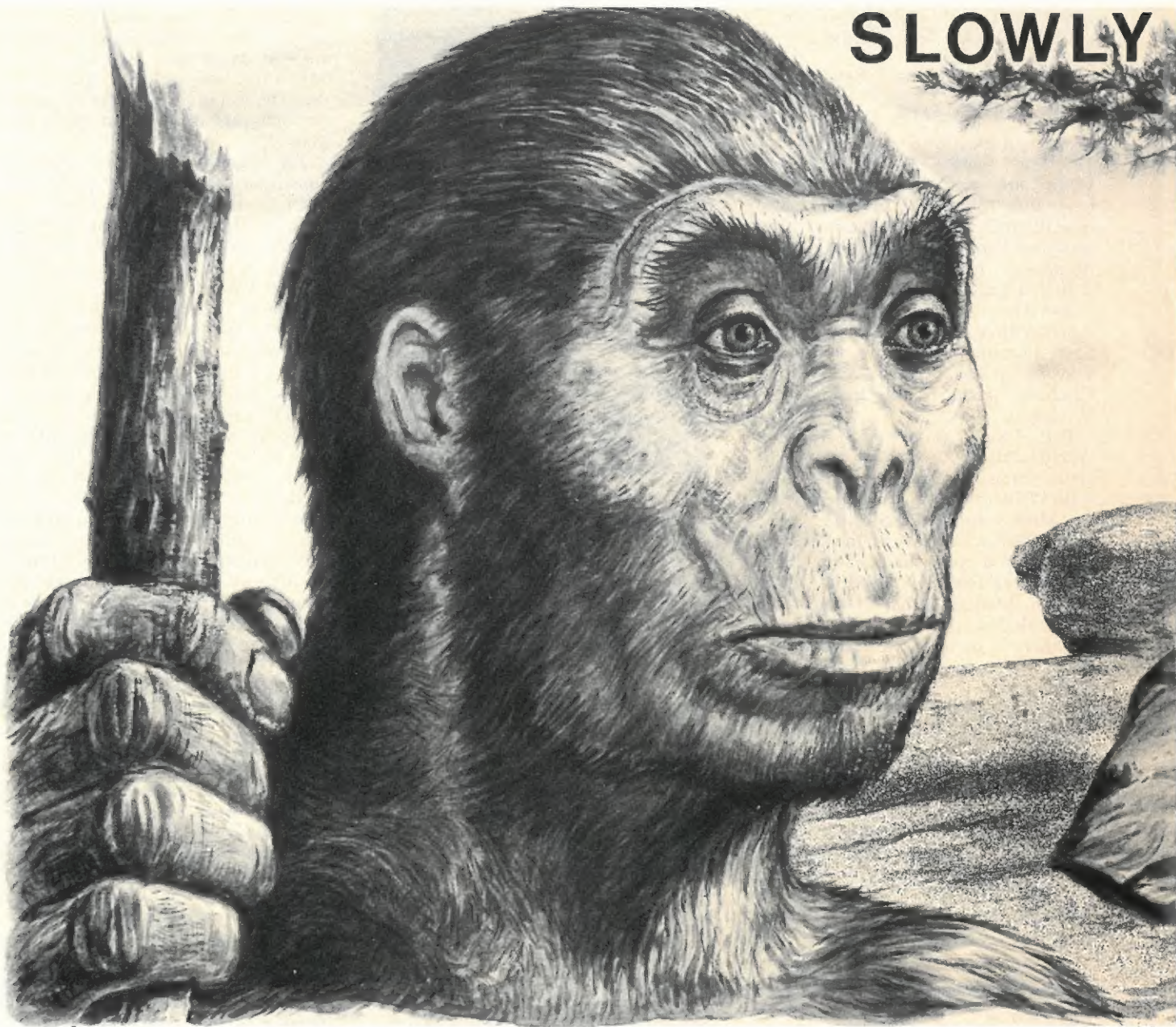
*Interzone* 69 just received. I must say I read your bit on page 5 with total bemusement ("Can You Tell Them Apart?") What are you suggesting we should have done?

Brian D'Amato's *Beauty* and Sheri Tepper's *Beauty* are both American novels, the former published by Delacorte, the latter by Doubleday. Which author should we have asked to change their title, and what to do? (Incidentally, Robin McKinley's *Beauty* didn't cause us any problems at all: we were more worried about a glitz novel Grafton published a couple of years ago – *Beauty*, by Lewin Joel. Obviously you missed it.)

We were a bit bothered when it appeared that we were publishing *Morningstar* by Peter Atkins and *Morningstar* by Erin Pizzey in the same



# SLOWLY



**O**m-at squatted on his haunches under a bloody sunset sky and watched one of the younger males mate with his mother. He could remember when In-sad had been born, screeching between a Low Woman's legs, covered in fear and pain. Om-at had been a number of summers old already, though just what that number was, no one could say. Now In-sad was himself old enough to come sidling up to a female, laying his guest-gift on the ground, stretching out one hand, begging.

As he watched, Pan-at-lee crouched over the dead baby antelope, seeming to ignore In-sad's imploring whispers, not words, which were precious difficult magic, just sounds, not quite whimpers of desperate desire. She touched its skin next to the death wound on its throat, put her finger to her lips, pink tongue flashing briefly, brown eyes squeezing shut. Long, still moment, In-sad holding his breath, then Pan-at-lee opened her eyes again and smiled at him, picked up the guest-gift and clutched it to her breast. In-sad's crow of pleasure echoed off the rock-face nearby.

Pan-at-lee positioned herself for him, smiling,

waiting, lying on her back as befit O-lo-a's Second Woman. In-sad scowled briefly, but he must have known this before he approached her. Pan-at-lee represented status more than anything else, and she demanded a very pretty guest-gift indeed. In-sad touched her here and there, sniffed at her, then mounted, hips curling under as far as he could force them to go, grunting with effort.

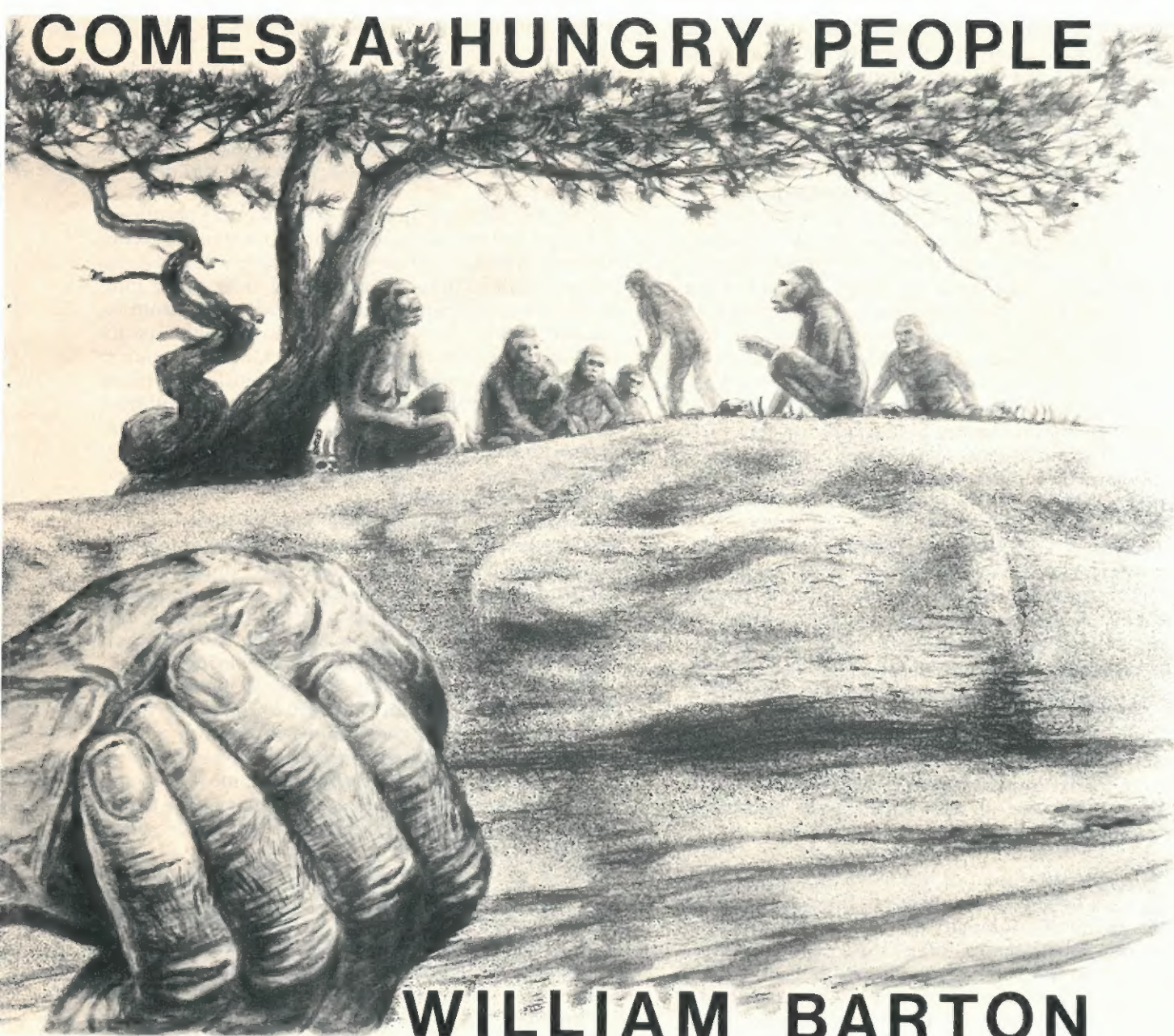
Om-at sat back on his buttocks, legs splayed in the dust, back against the scaly bark of his favourite old tree, one hand on his own genitals, watching, remembering all the scenes of his life. Arousal was a splinter somewhere behind his eyes, a fist curled at the bottom of his abdomen. Quite a few sunsets had accumulated in memory, he realized, since the last time he'd caught a guest-gift and come crawling up to a female, whining appropriately, hand outstretched. Even the Low Women demanded *something*, a little mouse, a bird, a fat lizard.

Up on the little hill, O-lo-a sat among her women and children, the centre of attention, smiling with pleasure as they groomed her long sleek black hair,



# COMES A HUNGRY PEOPLE

Illustrations by Gerry Grace



## WILLIAM BARTON

smoothed the soft fuzzy lanugo on the hard brown skin of her arms. The First Woman was in her prime now, taller than most other waz-ho-don, well able to meet challenges from the more ambitious among the Low Women, able to discipline refractory males with ease. Even a cabal of challengers wouldn't have a chance. And if O-lo-a wasn't enough, there was always Pan-at-lee, ready to stand beside her, teeth bared, reeking of anger, muscles coiled.

O-lo-a had been First Woman since Om-at was a boy, thrashing her predecessor, name lost and forgotten, so thoroughly that the Old Woman soon died. Every now and again, up on the hill, where she sorted and shared out the day's forage, O-lo-a would blink, calling attention to her frightening blue-white eyes. No one had eyes like that, not in memory, not in legend. Even the children of O-lo-a's body had decent brown eyes, a waz-ho-don's eyes, deep and full of life. O-lo-a's eyes were empty and soulless, seeming to suck you in and compel obeisance. When O-lo-a was gone, she would be remembered.

You could hear them up there, whispering their

female words, quick, a bit like the gurgling of water in a stream, magic words, hard to follow, so unlike the short, sharp barking words of a male. You could understand a male when he spoke, his words said one by one, isolated and without hidden meaning.

They'd been at this camp now for a long while, time enough to wear away the grass, time enough for the females to scour the countryside bare, time enough for the males, in search of yet another guest-gift, to drive away the small game. Time, soon, to move on, walk down the valley to the next camp, one or another of the dozens sited throughout the tribe's territory. Time to move on, but that was O-lo-a's decision to make.

Soft rustle of dry bushes, leaves rattling against each other, and Ta-den was beside him, squatting. Standing, he was tall, unusually slender, quick and agile, a valuable Front Rank hunter, a good companion to Om-at, who was slow and strong. A suitable partner in a male yo-band of two. Now Ta-den nudged him, grinning, pointing to where In-sad was thrashing atop Pan-at-lee. "Guest-gift? Fat."



True. As Second Woman, Pan-at-lee was always in demand. It had made her sleek and heavy, and so strong she dropped her babies with no more than an effortful grunt. Om-at gave Ta-den a shadowy smile and moved one hand in a duck-bill movement. Quack. Quack. Quack. Ta-den. Always talking, one word after another, barking like a male, yes, but in sequences like a female. Ta-den grinned and nudged him again.

Commotion in the distance. From beyond the hill, Ko-tan and his two friends came into the clearing, young males getting out of their way, Low Women peering at them, looking to see what they had in the way of guest-gifts. Nothing. Empty hands. Some of the females began to titter and nudge each other, and it was just then In-sad hooted, signalling he was done. More tittering. Ko-tan was getting old now, weakening, though still strong enough, and had been first among males since before O-lo-a had become First Woman. Thinking back, Om-at realized he couldn't remember a time when Ko-tan hadn't lorded it over the males. Still, it was the females who tittered at him now; that was all that mattered.

Ko-tan stood and stared for a while, at grinning In-sad, at Pan-at-lee, who yawned, sitting up, beginning to work on her little antelope. Ko-tan suddenly turned on one of his followers, rugged, round-faced Mu-lot, raising a fist, barking quick angry words. Mu-lot cowered and tried to hide behind tall pudgy Dak-at, who was known to eat guest-gifts himself rather than hand them over for sex.

Ta-den snickered, then gestured with his thumb at Ko-tan, made the duck-bill movement with his other hand. "Quack," he said dryly. "Quack." It made Om-at laugh. Ta-den, for all his unnecessary volubility, could be a very amusing male.

**B**y late afternoon of the following day, Om-at and Ta-den had been out in the bush, stalking fruitlessly, for many hours. They'd eaten their fair share of the females' forage stock in the morning, of course, but hunger was gnawing at them, a constant distraction. Pretty soon, it would be time to go home and meekly eat the evening meal, sitting by themselves, outside the ring of females and children, Low Women chattering merrily, young ones giggling among themselves. And, from not so far away, they'd hear the happy noises of males who'd been luckier on the hunt.

There wouldn't be many of those. It really was time to move the camp.

Ta-den tapped him on the shoulder and whispered, "Drink."

Om-at nodded. Cold water from the stream would quiet his belly's sharp complaint for another little while. After that it would be time to go back, apparently empty-handed. Om-at felt the fist of desire clutch again in his abdomen, bringing forth dark anger, a particle of resentment. It had gone on too long and tonight, no doubt, he would slink off in the darkness to do it by himself. When they watched him go, the Low Women would snicker and point and nudge each other.

Ta-den, a little bit ahead, about to walk out on the bank of the stream, stopped suddenly, one hand reaching back, touching Om-at on the chest. He twisted, looking back over his shoulder, eyes wide

with excitement, and, in a voice quiet as a breeze, said, "Tor-o-don."

Om-at stiffened. Tor-o-don. That could be bad news or good. There had been a large band of tor-o-don moving up the valley since before the last Full Moon, wandering clumsily about, fighting with the little baboon clans over hard, gritty forage the waz-ho-don wouldn't eat.

He crept forward, peering over Ta-den's shoulder. There was a little splashing from the stream, drawing his eyes. There. A tall muscular waz-ho-don-shaped animal, pale-skinned, covered all over with long black hair, crouched by the stream, drinking from its cupped hands. As it bent over, Om-at could see its bare, pink genital area. A female. Good. Tor-o-don males were extremely dangerous, a full head taller than a man, powerfully muscled, apparently almost as strong as the knuckle-walkers rumoured to exist somewhere over in the sunset lands. Fortunately, they were also very slow. But if they got their hands on you, you were finished.

Females, by contrast, were smaller than waz-ho-don, generally no heavier than fully grown antelopes. Unfortunately, they were quite fast, impossible to catch under most circumstances. Ko-tan, supposedly, had once brought back an adult tor-o-don female and made a guest-gift for every male in the tribe. It was a night the older males relished remembering.

This one was too far away. By the time they reached that spot she'd be running down the river bank, nothing more than an odd smell left behind.

Another splash. Om-at clutched Ta-den's shoulder. There, up river from the female, was a tor-o-don cub, no more than a summer or so old, a hairy little thing, sitting on its backside, dabbling its feet in the water, cooing softly to itself.

Om-at pulled his friend, turning him around, tapped himself on the chest, flexed his biceps and pointed at the female. Tapped Ta-den, made a running motion with his fingers, pointed at the infant. Ta-den nodded. Muscular Om-at would distract the female while quick Ta-den would run out and grab the baby. He knocked a fist on his forehead. OK.

Om-at got into position, slinking through the underbrush to a point closest to the female and waiting. When Ta-den barked, he launched himself out into the open, running at the female, barking his magic word, *Bite!* over and over. The female spun, milk-filled breasts bouncing, mouth open with astonishment, eyes full of fear.

What an odd face! Om-at could never look at a tor-o-don without a strange thrill going down his spine. All animals had faces, of course, even fish had faces. All you needed was eyes, nose and mouth. If you peered close, even the little black ants had faces. This face was very waz-ho-don-like. Brown waz-ho-don eyes, nose, even mouth, though the yellow teeth were so big and flat. But the brows, heavy with bone, the flat head under short, coarse hair... and, of course, hair everywhere, covering up that weird pale skin.

Looking at Om-at, the female lifted her fists, glanced up river, recoiled, screamed with despair... despite himself, Om-at looked. There. Ta-den had the infant, holding it by shoulder and head. The baby squalled, then Ta-den twisted hard. You could hear the little neck crackle and break. Another scream from the female.



She turned then and ran, knowing the baby was dead, saving herself. Om-at stood still and watched her run. Slimmer than a waz-ho-don female. Faster. Lacking a waz-ho-don's wide hips and slightly waddling gait. With distance, however, the differences faded and suddenly it could have been a waz-ho-don female running away, dark hair blurred into dark skin. Still watching, Om-at felt that splinter of desire again, and thought of the infant, of what his share would buy.

**A**s the sun was going down, Om-at and Ta-den squatted under a tree not far from camp. In the distance, they could hear waz-ho-don sounds, female voices laughing and talking, males coming through the underbrush in their ones and twos and threes. Every now and again you'd hear a burst of excitement from the females which meant, usually, that someone had come home with a guest gift. Om-at smiled. Shortly, there would be a couple of happy females. Tor-o-don babies were tender eating indeed, and very hard to get. There was enough here, in fact, that he and Ta-den would be able to eat a few tidbits themselves before going into camp.

While he waited for Ta-den to chip a fresh edge on the cutting stone, Om-at turned the dead baby over and over on the moss, dusting it off, admiring its fine plump shape. The little face was a bit dark and distorted, eyes open and bugged out, dark tongue protruding, but that was a minor detail. He spread the little legs and looked at tiny female genitals, wondered what they would have looked like full-grown. Like a waz-ho-don female? Images of various women's genitals formed in his imagination, rekindling that splinter of desire. He wished Ta-den, as patient and meticulous as he was voluble, would hurry up.

Who would he choose? Not Pan-at-lee, of course, one didn't choose one's own mother... O-lo-a? Delicious thought. Or maybe one of the Low Women would be better. They were always willing to present for you, lacking the status simply to lie down.

Crash of vegetation, and there they were. Ko-tan, holding a big stick, looking down at him, eyes angry, a few steps back Mu-lot and Dak-at, empty handed. Empty handed. Ko-tan looked at the tor-o-don baby and his eyes blazed. Commands, quickly barked. The other two scuttled around him, headed for Ta-den, who jumped to his feet, chattering with anger, throwing his stone at them, missing.

Ko-tan pointed his stick at the baby and said, "Give."

Give? Om-at stood, flexing his muscles, hoping Ko-tan would be intimidated, knowing he wouldn't. "No."

Ko-tan hit him over the head with the big stick and Om-at went down, tasting blood in his mouth, knowing his nose must be bleeding. "No." only whispered. Ko-tan hit him again, hard, on one shoulder, then snatched up the dead baby and walked away, snickering, toward camp. Mu-lot and Dak-at let Ta-den go, backing away, then followed Ko-tan. And they were licking their lips, knowing they'd get a little share too.

**M**oonlight time. Om-at sat by himself, back against his favourite tree, watching things happen, seething with bitter anger. Anger at Ko-tan. Anger at

himself. Someday, someone would take the power from Ko-tan. Om-at would have liked to be that someone, knew it would never happen.

Up on the hilltop, surrounded by her circles of sleeping women and children, O-lo-a let herself be mated by Ko-tan. For him, she presented, resting on knees and elbows, buttocks thrust into the air, legs spread just so. Ko-tan kneeled behind her, grinning in the semi-darkness, moonlight shining on his teeth and eyes, thrusting slowly, fat belly wobbling back forth, every now and again whispering his pleasure. O-lo-a's face was close to the ground and Om-at knew she would be gnawing at bits of tor-o-don baby.

He imagined himself up there in the moonlight, kneeling behind her, thrusting into the magic depths... growl of anger at the erection that suddenly swelled on his abdomen. Image of himself in some dark forest glade, standing over Ko-tan, hitting him in the head with that same big stick, over and over again until the light in his eyes went out.

He looked away, fury a sickening turmoil in his stomach, forcing himself not to watch. And, tonight of all nights, he would not slink away into the darkness and do it by himself. People knew what had happened, were snickering already. They would laugh aloud if they saw him go.

There.

Not far away on the edge of the woods, another little drama. Lu-don was a strange old cripple, born with those twisted legs, never able to hunt, unable to run fast enough. Once weaned, he'd stayed among the women, listening to them, in the end talking like them, growing ever stranger as he aged. O-lo-a kept him close by, seemed to think there was some special magic in his words. Women's magic, spoken in words no male could understand. Except Lu-don, who shuffled in the dust, dragging one withered leg, hopping on the stouter one, always grimacing with anger.

Just now, he was at poor Pan-sat again. The Low Women would watch and titter among themselves. They sometimes called Lu-don the Last Woman. When they did, Pan-sat was called the Last Woman's Mate. It had taken Om-at a long time to understand what those three words, said right together like that, signified. Women always gave out names, naming their babies at weaning time, men sometimes unable to understand or even say their own names, just learning to recognize the sound.

In the darkness, you could hear Pan-sat crying softly, bent over in front of Lu-don. From this angle, all you could see was Lu-don's crooked shoulders and his slowly thrusting hips.

Sitting there, watching, Om-at shivered, glad he was who he was. There were worse things in life than having one's guest-gift stolen by Ko-tan.

**T**he next day Om-at and Ta-den went out hunting again, full of desperate determination. The sun came up a fat orange ball in a sky streaked with a few narrow clouds, stained here and there with fear-red, promising a hot day to come. That would be good. It would keep the other predators still for much of the day, yet would drive the herbivores, who had to get out and eat, down to the river, down to the little streams that fed it. Somewhere out there, antelope would be drinking, careless babies wandering away



from the adults. And, somewhere out there, was a large tor-o-don band, males and females alike rooting all day long for their diet of seeds and ground nuts.

The tor-o-don didn't always stick together, that much was common knowledge. After huddling for the night, the males would split up, each going off to forage with his little band of females and children. And, sometimes, the females and their children would wander away from that male-led family and forage for themselves. It made Om-at remember yesterday's female, standing there, pendulous breasts swinging, water droplets on her mustache and beard, legs spread in a carefully balanced stance, fists raised.

If Ta-den hadn't been there to take the infant, the female would have fought him, just like a waz-ho-don female. But he was bigger than a tor-o-don female and probably could have beaten her. Interesting thought, circling around several times before being dismissed as irrelevant.

By mid-morning, with the sun bright and hot overhead, the sky burned clear, Om-at and Ta-den paused to drink from the stream, filling their bellies with cold water, then dropping down to rest in the shade of a low, spreading thorn tree. There was a bush nearby with bright red flowers, what females usually called a "scare flower," and Om-at stared at it, eyes slitted against the sunlight, watching a few black and yellow bees drone about, foraging for their hive.

There was a thought. Raid the hive and get some honey. It wasn't meat, but a wad of honeycomb would do as a guest-gift. He tapped Ta-den and pointed at the bush. "Bees."

Ta-den looked, grinned, shook his head. He pinched himself several times on the forearm and said, "Ow. Ow. Ow."

Right. You could get killed raiding a bee-hive. Memory told him that a tor-o-don could safely raid a hive, the bees apparently getting caught in all that hair. Still, they must get stung on the eyes and nose, and on their exposed genitals... Another memory of the day before, the female bending over to drink, space around her bottom pink as a baboon's butt.

The bushes rustled and the two were on their feet, crouching, alert. This could be Ko-tan and his yoband, following them, waiting to steal their catch. Om-at relaxed. Pan-sat and his friends, brothers Id-an and O-dan. They were a poor sort of group, Pan-sat so small and weak, Id-an with his crippled left arm, always carrying a stick around to make up for it, O-dan the biggest, but not very smart. They very seldom had a guest-gift to show for their efforts, but what else was a male to do with his time?

Om-at felt a sharp pang of pity for Pan-sat, remembering him bent over in the night, whimpering from Lu-don's attentions, only rarely approaching a Low Woman with some pitiful guest-gift of his own.

Strange notion: Lu-don never needed to bother with a guest-gift. He had Pan-sat, who didn't merit one.

The three came and squatted under the tree with them, silent. Here were both types of hunting group a waz-ho-don male could join, a three-member ad-yo, a two-member enen-yo. A single male could go out and hunt by himself, but it wasn't much fun.

Pan-sat kept staring at him, eyes seeming to wander around on his torso, looking at his big chest and shoulders, the fat bulges of muscle in his upper arms. Om-at

felt a sudden chill, wondering if Pan-sat imagined him as a substitute for Lu-don. He flinched when the man touched him on the thigh.

Pan-sat said, "Om-at. Ta-den. En. En." Lifting his hand with only the thumb and little finger extended. Looked around at his friends. "En? En? En?" A quick head-shake, then he folded his hand into a fist and lifted the three middle fingers. "Ad."

Well, yes. Enen. The fingers that did the most work. Ad. The three that made up the body of the hand. An enen-yo was usually better than an ad-yo, in any case.

Pan-sat gestured around at the countryside, taking in the whole world. "Guest-gift. Catch. Catch. Catch. Tor-o-don."

Hmh. Not quite like female speech, which tended to weld words right together, but close, probably a side-effect of his association with Lu-don. Om-at nodded. "Tor-o-don."

"Baby. Guest-gift. O-lo-a." Slight grin.

Om-at stiffened with anger but let it go. Pan-sat wasn't worth chastising. Lu-don would take care of that.

Pan-sat held up his open hand and said, "Adenen." The word males had been taught to use in place of the female magic word "hand."

Ta-den suddenly leaned forward and sniffed Pan-sat's fingers. Om-at wondering if they smelled of Lu-don. He said, "Adenen?" eyebrows lifted.

Pan-sat said, "Tor-o-don. Guest-gift. Adenen."

"Adenen-yo."

Om-at looked at them doubtfully. Hunting bands were seldom known to cooperate, it just didn't do any good. They would only get in each other's way. But that sudden vision: The ad-yo going out and risking its collective neck trying to distract a big male tor-o-don while Om-at and Ta-den ran in and grabbed a couple of babies. That would be enough for an aden-en's worth of guest gifts.

Ta-den nudged Om-at in the ribs. "Adenen-yo." He smiled.

So be it.

**I**n the late afternoon, despite hopeful planning, they came upon the tor-o-don family suddenly. There were seven of them sitting beside the stream, eating from a little pile of tubers and nuts and big seeds, drinking water from cupped hands, grunting and muttering to themselves, sounds of contentment, nothing like words. Two small females, four children of various sizes, a huge, burly male, made larger by his shaggy black coat, off to one side, glaring at nothing from under thick projecting brows.

Pan-sat squeaked with alarm when he popped out of the bushes, skidding to a stop. He turned, almost panicky, wanting to scuttle back into cover, but Om-at was right behind him, looking around, taking in the situation, barking a quick warning cry to the others, not words, just the old male sound for hunt-danger.

One of the females screamed, some tor-o-don cry, all heads turning, looking at the waz-ho-don, then the male was on his feet, snarling out a chattering warning, rushing toward them, arms outstretched, fists clenched.

Om-at shoved useless Pan-sat out of the way, barked Ta-den's name, and put his own fists up. The male was enormous, head and shoulders taller than Om-at,



huge muscles bulging right through the fur, mouth open, showing big yellow teeth, fat stubby canines. Fists as big as a waz-ho-don's head.

Ta-den got out beside him quickly, looking around wildly, assessing the situation. He barked, "Ad-yo. Catch. Catch," then crouched and launched himself at the tor-o-don's legs. Too late now to simply distract.

The male stumbled over him, but didn't quite fall, kneeling, bending, snapping its jaws at Ta-den, who shouted something, a cry of pain. Om-at jumped, landing on its shoulders, driving it flat on the river-bank mud, while Ta-den rolled away. Strong! This was worse than trying to wrestle with Pan-at-lee, who was the strongest waz-ho-don anyone had ever heard of. The tor-o-don humped up under him, trying to reach around, then reaching down, grabbing at his legs, fingernails scoring bare skin, little fear-lines of pain. Om-at could do nothing but maintain his grip on two fistfuls of coarse hair. The tor-o-don stood up with Om-at riding his shoulders, snarling with rage and frustration, obviously unhurt, unafraid.

Om-at felt a sudden twist of fear. This wasn't going to work.

Crack! The tor-o-don staggered, clutching his head, howling. Ta-den was in front of him, holding a big river cobble in both hands. Crack. Right on the forehead.

The male spun, hurling Om-at off his back, and reached for Ta-den, who dropped the rock, shouting his fear, trying to scramble away. Too late. He screamed as the tor-o-don twisted his arms.

Om-at got to his feet, grabbed the rock, got behind the tor-o-don. The sound it made on the back of the flat skull was sullen and hollow. The tor-o-don grunted, dropping Ta-den. Om-at hit him again. The tor-o-don turned, eyes addled, reaching for him. Om-at hit him in the middle of the face, amazed at the sudden splash of bright blood. The tor-o-don went to his knees and Om-at hit him again, right on the broad eyebrow ridge. The tor-o-don went down, bleeding from the ears, struggled feebly for a moment, went still.

Om-at stood poised, adrenalin roaring through his veins, ready, but it was over. He suddenly felt sick and weak, arms falling, hands releasing the cobble. "Ta-den."

Ta-den looked up at him, eyes big. "Ow..." he whispered, touching a bloody bite on his shoulder. It was a bad one, but not the worst Om-at had seen. A little mud from the river bed would soothe it. They both stood, looking around.

Some distance away, Pan-sat and O-dan struggled with a tor-o-don female they'd pinned, barely able to hold her down. Id-an, minus his stick, sat in the middle of the stream, where he'd apparently been thrown, looking dazed. The other five tor-o-dons, a female, the four children, were gone.

Ta-den slapped him on the shoulder. He pointed to the female, "Guest-gift," then at the dead male, "Dinner!"

Om-at smiled, nodded. They'd never be able to carry two dead bodies back to camp. Just the female, then. And they'd butcher the male here, eat what they could, leave the rest for the wild dogs and the vultures. He looked up. Yes. There were already one or two drifting about, high up in the sky. Or... the female





had stopped struggling now, was lying quietly under Pan-sat and O-dan, probably resigned to her fate. Maybe they could make her walk back to camp before killing her...no. That would be even harder than hauling two carcasses. She'd be sure to get away.

He walked over to the group and prodded Pan-sat with his toe. "Off." The two small males released the tor-o-don female, sliding away cautiously. She lay there spread-eagled, looking up at him dull-eyed, obviously stunned. Probably hit in the head a number of times. He squatted, touching her here and there, feeling her soft breasts, arms with hard, stringy muscle, felt the smooth, soft fur on her thighs and abdomen. Finally, he knelt between her legs, inspecting her more-or-less hairless genitals. They were similar to what you saw on a waz-ho-don female under all the hair. That was true of most mammals, of course, but these were just the right size...

Om-at realized, with a sudden start, that he was erect and ready to go. One thrust...behind him, Ta-den barked with amazement. The female shrieked and lifted up, fists clenched. Pan-sat and O-dan jumped forward, grabbing her arms, holding her down, while Om-at continued to thrust. The female struggled against her captors, mewling with obvious pain, until Om-at was done.

Om-at stood beside Ta-den, watching while the others took their turns with the crying female, hefting the nice, smooth river cobble in one hand. It was an astonishing sight.

Ta-den nudged him suddenly, gesturing at the struggling group. "Sex. Guest-gift. Sex. O-lo-a!" Big, big grin.

Om-at grinned back, rubbing his fingers on the surface of the stone, waiting for Id-an to finish before cracking the female's skull.

A few days later, Om-at sat in the darkness with his back up against the warm, smooth surface of his favourite hot-stone by the cliff camp. It hadn't taken them long to get here and this new countryside, down where the valley narrowed and the river widened, was rich with small game and fresh forage. His belly was full, the night around him rustling with the sounds of sex.

Nothing, of course, to compare with the night they'd come home stuffed with male tor-o-don meat, Pan-sat's ad-yo staggering beneath the weight of the female's carcass. They'd dumped it on the ground before wide-eyed O-lo-a, then Om-at had lifted his arms high and shouted. "Guest-gift! All!" A feast-orgy had followed, lasting far into the night.

Ko-tan, memory of his own long-ago special night now eclipsed, had been sullen with rage. And Om-at's status had risen far. It wouldn't last, of course, sooner or later Ko-tan would see to it that he was put in his place. Right now, though, he was everyone's friend.

There was whimpering in the night, somewhere off under the scrubby trees by the riverbank. Pan-sat's voice. Whimpering. Om-at squinted into the darkness. Yes. There. Lu-don squatting on his twisted legs, Pan-sat bent over before him, crying softly to himself. It had started again, as people forgot that so-recent night of triumph. Ko-tan would know what this meant too.

Nearby, Id-an and O-dan sat together, watching,

obviously upset, holding each other close, anger reflected in their postures. But merely watching. What could anyone do? Lu-don was the women's darling. Not even Ko-tan was allowed to chastise him.

Om-at felt the anger bubble up inside his chest and break open. Pan-sat deserved better than this. He'd helped catch the tor-o-don female, after all.

He got to his feet, standing beside the stone for a while, aware that Id-an and O-dan were looking at him now. "Adenen-yo..." he whispered, then stooped and picked up the river cobble he'd been carrying around since the day he and Ta-den had used it on the tor-o-don male. It had come to possess some kind of magic, though not even the women could put a name to it.

Decision. He walked over to where Lu-don and Pan-sat were crouched, Lu-don whispering soft female words to himself, Pan-sat sobbing, face in the dust. Om-at barked, "Ad-en-en-yo!" and brought the rock down on the back of Lu-don's neck. Crack. He simply fell away, as if boneless, and lay still on the ground.

Pan-sat peered over his shoulder, wide-eyed, and whispered, "Om-at?"

"Up."

Commotion behind him. Om-at turned and with a sinking feeling realized people were coming out of the bushes all over camp. The entire tribe. From her place atop the pile of scree against the cliff face, O-lo-a was on her feet, descending into the camp, walking swiftly forward. And the people were gathering, Low Women coming forward, males hanging back, fearful. He could see Ko-tan, still up on the rockpile where he'd been with O-lo-a. He wouldn't come down now.

O-lo-a came and knelt beside Lu-don, pushing at his still body, then rolling him over. "Lu-don?" Peering close, at his open, motionless eyes. "Dead Lu-don..." She looked up at Om-at then, eyes blazing, "Killed him!"

Though females' complex utterances were often hard for a male to understand, that was clear enough. Om-at felt a sudden scald of fear, the sensation that his bowels wanted to let go.

O-lo-a lashed out with her fist, aiming for his genitals. She missed, landing a hard blow against one hip bone as Om-at tried to dodge. Rage. Rage inside him. Om-at kicked at her, knocking her back on her buttocks.

Somewhere in the camp, a female voice wailed, "Hit First Woman?"

Om-at shouted, "Adenen-yo!" looking around.

Pan-sat stood there, shaking visibly. "Adenen..." he whispered, taking a hesitant step forward. Then he screamed, turned and bolted into the bushes. Another look around. Id-an and O-dan were already gone, fled. And Ta-den had been nowhere to be seen all evening. In the background, the Low Women were beginning to stamp their feet, slowly getting closer, chanting something, many words, the same ones, over and over, "...hit First Woman hit First Woman hit..."

A shadow loomed over Om-at, blocking the bright moonlight and he looked up at the broad heavy form of Pan-at-lee, shoulders dense with fat muscle, tall, strong, dangerous. And angry. He whispered, "Mama..." pleading. Like a child. Like this woman's child.



Pan-at-lee's heavy fist bounced off the side of his head, knocking him down. When he got back to his feet, shaking his head, dizzy, she hit him again, rolling him in the dust. "Mama!" he gasped.

"Bad!" She snarled. "Bad, bad boy!" Coming closer, lifting her fists. Behind her, the Low Women closed in, stamping and chanting, and Om-at realized they were going to kill him. He rolled hard, getting out of Pan-at-lee's path, got to his feet and ran away into the darkness.

**T**he four of them were sitting together the next morning beside the river, not far from the old camp, dazed and silent, when Ta-den strolled out of the bushes, tall, eyes bright, unmarked by fear. He squatted, clapping Om-at on the shoulder, squeezing slightly with his fingers. "Om-at."

Om-at patted him on the hand, still miserable, though he was glad to see his friend.

Ta-den smiled at the others and said, "Adenen-yo," waving a hand to include them all.

Odd. Ta-den hadn't been involved in last night's events, could go home any time he wanted to. He said, "Ta-den. Camp. O-lo-a. Guest-gift." A long and tiring sequence of thoughts. But it was the right thing to do. The rest of them, cast out of the tribe, would soon die, all alone in the wilderness.

Ta-den smiled and shook his head. "Om-at. Ta-den. Adenen-yo."

Om-at gave him an intense look. Across the way, under his own little bush, Pan-sat suddenly burst out sobbing, face hidden behind his hands. "People," he whispered. "Food."

It was true. This little band would not be able to survive on what small game it could catch. And only females knew how to find the food-plants that sustained them. Om-at didn't know if you could even live on just meat by itself. Lions did. So did dogs. Most things lived on plants, or, like waz-ho-don, mostly plants.

Ta-den nodded and, with a mournful look, said, "People. Sex."

That too. They were just five males, unless they wanted to find out just what Lu-don had gotten out of poor Pan-sat, whose predicament had caused this whole situation. Om-at felt a flash of anger. It had been Lu-don's fault, not Pan-sat. "Food," he said. "Women."

Pan-sat looked up. "Plants," he said.

Om-at twitched. *Plants*. That was a female magic word. He shrugged, looking around at a mass of undifferentiated vegetation. "Plants?" No. The magic word itself was not enough.

Ta-den tapped him on the shoulder. "Food," he said. "Tor-o-don. Plants. Female. Sex. Tor-o-don."

Om-at spent a moment remembering what they'd done to the tor-o-don female, then, suddenly, he gave Ta-den a very odd look. In addition to looking like waz-ho-don, the tor-o-don only ate plants.

**O**m-at sat by the riverbank examining his spoils, waiting for the others to finish mating with the two tor-o-don females they'd caught. Ordinarily, he would have joined in too, but the throbbing pain from his broken finger was just too much of a distraction. It had been a stupid way to get injured.

He'd been holding the male tor-o-don by the hair, expecting someone to bash in his head. Ta-den had complied, bringing the rock down right on top of Om-at's hand. The finger kept going crooked and it hurt when you pulled it straight again. Every time he winced, Ta-den would snicker.

Still, they would eat well tonight. The beefy male lay on his back, face crushed beyond recognition. Beside him lay a little pile of dead babies, rounded up, their necks broken. And, from the sounds the others were making, the females alone might be worth the price of a broken finger and a few painful bites.

The pile of stuff the tor-o-dons had been eating looked interesting enough, though it wasn't much like real food. A pile of little green seeds. Some coarse-looking yellow roots. A big, two-lobed nut. Om-at could remember having eaten something like this nut before. Not quite, but similar. You had to use a rock to break them open, then there was some soft, chewy stuff inside. He picked up one of the green seeds and tried to bite it. Crack. Ow! He felt his tooth, found a little divot where some of the enamel had flaked away. So much for that.

Now, the others were finished, were sitting beside the two terrified females, panting. Pan-sat grunted and got to his feet, picking up a rock with which he intended to brain them, adding to the already rather rich larder.

Om-at held up his hand. "No."

Pan-sat looked curious. "No?" Understanding grin. "Om-at. Sex." Gesturing at the females.

Om-at crawled over and patted one of the females on her crotch, which was damp just now. "Sex," he said. "Keep."

Pan-sat hefted the rock and said, "Food?"

"Sex."

Ta-den, who was standing over by the dead male, grinned. "Food," he said, nudging the carcass.

Om-at went over and kneeled beside the little pile of nuts and whatnot. "Food." When Pan-sat gave him another odd look, he picked up one of the yellow roots, gingerly bit off a chunk, chewed and swallowed. It tasted pretty bad, but it went down all right.

**O**m-at was just getting back to camp, the half-grown antelope he and Ta-den had caught slung across his shoulders, taking his turn at carrying it, when one of the tor-o-don females gave birth. They had five of them now, one apiece. Caring for them took a lot of time, but the labour was easy to divide. Om-at and Ta-den still went out to hunt, now getting meat the males would eat themselves, while Pan-sat's ad-yo, never any good at hunting, herded the females on their daily forage-rounds. They were getting pretty good at picking up only those things that waz-ho-don liked to eat, eating the seeds they wanted right away.

Interested, Om-at dropped the antelope on the ground and went over to where the female squatted, wanting to watch. Among their own kind it had been impossible, Low Women gathering around the mother-to-be, drowning out her wails with their own grunting, chanting, stamping dance. Now there was no one to stop them from doing whatever they wanted.

A couple of the females had given birth after capture, squatting in the dust to grunt softly and drop



little red squalling things that the waz-ho-don promptly ate. Maybe there was some way that this could simply go on, adding yet another source of food for the adenen-yo.

It seemed to be going much harder this time, the pregnant female, the one Om-at was himself accustomed to using for sex, squatting red-faced, crying and rubbing at her bloody genitals, straining as if constipated. Om-at crouched down and looked. Right there, he could see the top of the infant's head, slowly pushing out. The female suddenly grabbed him, screamed and convulsed. The infant squirted out, plopping on the ground, letting out a thin, startled scream of its own, still attached to the mother by some kind of dark, kinked vine-like thing. Well, that was always there, part of the birthing process of mammals. He'd seen dead baby baboons with these vines still coming out of their bellies.

He grabbed it up before the female could reach for it, ignoring her pitiful cries, inspecting the thing. Very strange. Big-browed like a tor-o-don, domed head like a waz-ho-don. Big too. He parted the little legs. Male. Sniffed. Mostly, it smelled like tor-o-don blood, but there was just this little whiff of waz-ho-don aroma, not quite right, but...

He handed it back to the female, who clutched it to her breast, looking at him wide-eyed. Om-at turned and glanced at Ta-den, who'd been watching closely. "Baby," he said.

Ta-den nodded slowly. "Baby," he agreed. But there was doubt in his voice.

**I**t was almost dark when the attack came, stars already visible, dark purple sky striated by orange and black clouds.

Om-at had been very nervous lately. They tried hard to stay away from O-lo-a's people, going way up the valley, avoiding the old camps. But the tor-o-don were clustered there now and they had to stay away from them as well. Though the females seemed accustomed to their lot, living with the adenen-yo, foraging for them, birthing their babies, they grew restive when they sensed other tor-o-dons. It would be a nuisance if any got away. Then they'd have to capture new ones, risking their lives in combat with the huge, fierce males, and they'd have to train them all over again.

To make matters worse, O-lo-a's people didn't seem to be avoiding them.

It began with a simple male bark, just the hunting cry bite! echoing in the darkness, then waz-ho-don males were coming out of the bushes all around them. Om-at got to his feet, shouting for Ta-den, panicky. There! Ko-tan, waving his familiar big stick, closely attended by Mu-lot and Dak-at. They could have handled those three, but the others...

There seemed to be many more waz-ho-don males than he remembered, all of them fat and strong. O-lo-a's people had prospered.

"Adenen-yo!" Loud cry in Ta-den's voice, tall shape looming in the lurid, fearful light of dusk, long stick in one hand, killing stone in the other. The adenen-yo had gotten proficient using those stones of late. And killing was what began to happen. Confusing scenes in the fading light, waz-ho-don faces red like sunset clouds, then red with blood, waz-ho-don screaming, waz-ho-don rolling in the dust.

In a little while, Om-at's crooked finger was broken again, pain lancing up his arm, hard, with each beat of his terrified heart, but the waz-ho-don were going down, heads breaking from the impact of his stone. They couldn't be winning, but...

He stumbled over a still form, scrambled to his feet, looking down, wondering if it was someone he knew. Id-an! Withered arm broken in two places, head smashed in, eyes open but sightless. Om-at looked around, wild-eyed. There! Ko-tan standing erect, waving his big stick overhead, eyes and teeth flashing in the darkness, small child-shape lying at his feet.

Om-at screamed, "Baby!"

Ko-tan looked at him, grinning, began to bring the stick down. Om-at bounded forward, swinging the stone at Ko-tan's head. He dodged, but that fat belly got in his way, made him slow. Crack. Ko-tan reeled, turned, hitting him with the stick, pain dancing in his chest. Om-at hit him in the head again, then again, and Ko-tan fell down. Om-at knelt, pounding with the rock twice more, making sure the thick skull was open, contents like exposed nut meat. Om-at reached in and took a handful of Ko-tan's brains, then stood.

Long silence.

In the distance, at the brow of a low hill nearby, Om-at could see O-lo-a and Pan-at-lee standing together, watching him. Slowly, he lifted the bit of Ko-tan to his mouth, took a little bite, chewed, swallowed. On the hill, Pan-at-lee seemed to stagger. She turned then and walked away, disappearing in the darkness. O-lo-a stood and stared for a little while, then she shouted the female orientation cry, echoing around the hills, the way they found each other when separated in the woods. The waz-ho-don males began to pull back, turning and running away into the night. When they were gone, O-lo-a too turned and went away.

Holding Baby in his bloody arms, Om-at took stock of the situation. Id-an, of course, was dead. So were two females and one of the new infants. But Baby was safe and there were six dead waz-ho-don on the ground. Ko-tan and five Lesser Men. Food, he thought. Ko-tan had tasted pretty good. Better, in fact, than a tor-o-don male.

**O**-lo-a's people left them alone after that, for an ad of summers, the longest span of time a waz-ho-don could clearly reckon, sticking to the lower end of the valley, leaving the adenen-yo a stretch of territory just below the tor-o-don foraging ground. Baby grew fast, in those three summers getting to be as large and strong as a grown male, though anyone could see, just from the size of his feet, that he would grow larger still. In the end, perhaps, as large as a tor-o-don male.

He seemed to like hunting with Ta-den and Om-at, much preferring their company to that of Pan-sat's ad-yo and the wordless tor-o-don females, going out with them often. He was strong and slow like Om-at, imitating his hunting techniques, but learned to speak like Ta-den, whose words could sometimes flow like Pan-sat's in a feminine stream.

Though Om-at was proud of him, Baby was still a very strange-looking adolescent. As a small child, he'd had the same brown, lanugo-covered skin of all waz-ho-don infants, but when he grew older... The



lanugo grew sparse and now, reaching puberty, he began to sprout adult hair, axillary and pubic hair of course, and also an adult's beard, but...when you looked close you could see it wasn't right. Where a waz-ho-don's beard grew only on his throat, Baby's beard was spreading up onto his cheeks and under his nose. The tor-o-don, male and female, had hair on their faces. And everywhere else.

The appearance of that hair meant something else as well: in another year, or two at the outside, they would have to go into tor-o-don territory and capture a couple of females for Baby. That would invest him with a man's estate, and it would be best for him to have two females, just like all the other men. Baby was sensitive; having less than any of the others would hurt his feelings.

Baby. That was another thing that bothered Om-at. Baby lacked a waz-ho-don name. But names came from females, and the tor-o-don females couldn't speak.

One day, when the three of them were out hunting, they followed antelope spoor down stream, skirting the edge of O-lo-a's territory, sneaking up on the herd, keeping them down wind, hunting the way lions hunted, staying alert. The antelopes were grazing, and they were alone. This was border territory and, absent of cat predators, they'd be unwary. Sometimes, when there were waz-ho-don about, the antelopes would stick around baboon tribes, relying on the baboon sentries to warn them of danger. There were so many people in the valley now it was getting harder to hunt. The animals were easily spooked.

They spread out in the long grass, creeping closer, picking out fawns and yearlings they might be able to catch, each with a sharp-edged cobble, each with a long stick. They tried to be quiet, but the grass was unusually dry, dead thatch crackling softly every time they moved. The antelopes were getting nervous, looking around suspiciously. Still, so long as they didn't *smell* anything...

One of them stotted suddenly, bounding high in the air, spotted them, and, by the time it hit the ground again, was starting to run. The herd milled, panicky, getting ready to flee.

Om-at snarled and barked, "Go!" The three of them burst from concealment, running after the fleeing animals. For a few brief seconds they got closer, relying on a biped's superior manoeuvrability and acceleration, then the antelopes started to pull away, never coming within reach of a stick. Om-at started to pull up, knowing it was fruitless, then Ta-den. Baby, still a child, continued to run.

Om-at shouted, "Baby!"

And Baby stopped, screaming with frustration, dropped his stick, drew back his arm and threw the killing stone overhand. It bounced off the little straggler he was after, stunning it momentarily, spindly legs flailing in the air. Baby hurled himself on the antelope, pounding it to death with his fists, screeching with excitement. It was his first solitary kill.

Om-at and Ta-den walked up, looking down at Baby and his kill. Ta-den picked up the cobble and hefted it. "Throw..."

Om-at nodded. Everyone knew you could throw things. That was how you were supposed to protect yourself from leopards, who could follow you right





up a tree but were afraid of flying rocks. It was common knowledge, just like the knowledge you were supposed to drive away dogs by hitting them with a big stick. No one, however, had ever suggested you could bring down a running antelope with a well-thrown rock.

"Baby..." he shrugged, gesticulating helplessly. "Baby."

Ta-den hefted the stone again, looking down at the boy, nodding slowly to himself, eyes half closed. "Good Baby." An extremely female thing to say, though they'd heard the phrase enough as children. When a female said it, you felt warm indeed. "Jar. Don."

Om-at looked at his friend with renewed respect, then back down at Baby. "Jar-don." It was a good name, very suggestive. Don, the generic, genderless word for a "person." Jar, the word you used to describe any type of animal you'd never seen before. He patted Baby on the head. "Jar-don."

The boy smiled up at him.

Three more summers went by and things were going very poorly in the valley. The dry summers had added up to a real drought, something outside living memory, the river shrunken and muddy, some of the smaller streams drying right up. Game was sparse and foraging poor, worse still because the tor-o-don band was competing with them for plant food, invading their territory on a regular basis, making the aden-en-yo females troublesome. And waz-ho-don males from O-lo-a's tribe were beginning to come upriver again in search of ever more elusive small game.

On some days the sky seemed hazy now, with a funny smell that made your hair prickle uneasily. The only ray of hope was something unexpected: they'd been joined by three new males, an ad-yo kicked out of O-lo-a's camp for no reason anyone could figure out. Since Ko-tan died, no one male had been able to take his place; there was a great deal of fighting among the males, Low Women restive and mean-tempered, held in check only by O-lo-a's dead blue eyes and Pan-at-lee's muscle.

Om-at and Ta-den sat on the brow of the low hill they'd staked out for themselves, squinting in the sunshine, looking down on the dusty camp. These days, it seemed full of people. The newcomers, an amorphous mass of captured tor-o-don females, youngsters and children born over the years since aden-en-yo had come into being. More than aden-en-yo now, certainly. Om-at understood that they'd formed a new tribe. More than that, a new *kind* of tribe, one that suited him more than O-lo-a's ever had. Sometimes, when he dreamed, he could still taste Ko-tan in his mouth, warm and delicious.

These were bad days, though, the worst days anyone could remember. In O-lo-a's tribe, people must be angry. Without a steady flow of guest-gifts, no one would be having sex. Here, no guest-gifts were required for sex, the females simply did what you wanted, when you wanted. But they'd grown accustomed to eating meat, so much so that it seemed a necessity rather than an occasional rich treat.

Sometimes, Om-at and Ta-den would climb up to the rim of the valley and stand looking out at the

world, which they remembered as having been more or less green. The broad plains were brown now, and empty. Even the distant mountains, where the knuckle-walkers were supposed to live, seemed dry and dead. The sky was cloudless, but a pale gray pall drifted low over everything.

Now they sat staring at the crowded camp. Knowing each other's thoughts through long familiarity. Finally, Om-at grunted and said, "Adenen-yo. Food. Die." He looked over at Ta-den, whose eyes seemed shut. "O-lo-a. Kill. Tor-o-don. Kill."

Ta-den opened his eyes and looked at him. For Om-at, that was a long, painful, significant cluster of words. "No. Adenen-yo kill." That female phrasing again. Sometimes Ta-den could be scary.

Om-at thumped his fist on the ground, then pointed. "Adenen-yo." The original five. "Ad-yo." The newcomers. "Adad. Jar-don." They were down there together, Jar-don and five younger friends, a grouping the waz-ho-don nervously called "adad." Down there now, playing with a couple of young half-breed females. Even the tor-o-don females seemed to be more relaxed around them, finding them more familiar than the little waz-ho-don males. "Adenen-yo. Ad-yo. Adad." He stared hard at Ta-den. "O-lo-a. Kill. Tor-o-don. Kill."

Ta-den stared back, frowning. Finally, he said, "Food. Tor-o-don. Sex. O-lo-a kill."

Om-at nodded, sealing the bargain. "Moonlight," he said.

And then, moonlight time. Fourteen males entered O-lo-a's camp that night, eight waz-ho-don, Jar-don and his five young friends, not bothering with stealth, striding into the clearing with their sticks and hunting stones ready. There might be as many as twenty adult waz-ho-don males remaining in the camp, but Om-at knew they had nothing to fear from them. Jar-don's adad, by themselves, could beat them all. The real danger was O-lo-a. O-lo-a and Pan-at-lee and, behind them, the collective mass of the Low Women. Individually, they were no stronger, no bigger than any waz-ho-don male, but the Low Women always worked together, many hands as one, working toward a common goal. Or to defeat any single challenger.

Om-at stepped forward quickly, anxious to get started. The sooner this was over, the sooner he would sleep easily again.

People were stirring everywhere now, eyes opening all over the camp, reflecting moonlight, mouths opening to murmur amazement and anger. Adenen-yo? Here? A male stood, jumping before Om-at, barking his group's challenge-word. Om-at hit him in the head, kicking him as he fell, stepping over the still body.

"O-lo-a!" he shouted. The Low Women were up now, moving in a dark, murmuring mass, stamping their feet, already angry. Little knots of men were getting together here and there, forming up into their yo-bands, eyes wide and fearful, moving to the periphery of the camp. This was Women's business, the chastising of men. Look what had happened when O-lo-a let herself be talked into sending Ko-tan to do the job.

"O-lo-a!" Up on her hill, of course, watching. And



the Low Women were moving together, chanting, stamping, working themselves up into a fury. Then they would rush forward and Om-at's people would run. Or they would die. Or maybe not. He hefted the stone in his hand, trying to pick out a good target, gave up and threw it at the group as a whole. He couldn't throw stones like Jar-don, no waz-ho-don could, but surely he couldn't miss so many females standing so close together...

The rock bounced off a female's head with a hollow sound and she fell to the earth, senseless.

Long moment of silence, then the Low Women shrieked their rage, ran forward as a single mass, almost as if they were a single animal. Om-at's people threw their stones, felling a few more, then beat the rest back with their long sticks, like a pack of hungry dogs.

This was a dangerous moment. Sooner or later, O-lo-a's waz-ho-don would pick up the rocks and start throwing them back, would find sticks of their own. The shock of surprise would wear off and then bad things would begin to happen. "O-lo-a!"

The two women began to move down the hill, walking slowly, filled with the sense of their own power, parting the mass of the Low Women, stepping forward to put things right. O-lo-a's pale eyes reflected moonlight better than most, making her look a little like a leopard. Pan-at-lee was a terrifying sight, dark and bulky, bigger than any of the waz-ho-don males. Smaller than Jar-don though. A lot smaller.

O-lo-a stood before him then, teeth exposed in an angry grimace, hands clenched in two hard knobby fists. O-lo-a was starting to get old. Not, however, so old she couldn't dispose of the likes of this puny male. "Om-at," she said, words a male-like snarl.

And Pan-at-lee, towering over him, said, "Bad, bad, boy." Those old familiar words, said to a long-ago child in that same deep awful voice, made his insides crawl.

Pan-at-lee, however, was only the Second Woman. Om-at's business was with the First Woman. He turned to face O-lo-a, hefted his big stick, getting a good grip, then broke it over her head, a loud splintery crack filling the night. O-lo-a went down, mouth open, and sat there, looking up at him, blood flowing from her nose, pale eyes stunned. He lifted the stump of the stick, intending to drive its jagged end into her throat...

Pan-at-lee screamed. Screamed and stepped forward, fist pounding into his face, crushing his nose. Om-at fell, rolling, white-light filling his eyes. He tried to kneel, to get back up, but Pan-at-lee kicked him, heel stamping into one kidney, filling him with nausea. He fell and rolled onto his back, staring up at her looming shape, realizing that he must have made a terrible mistake. Now...

Pan-at-lee's teeth showed in a terrible grin and she crouched, ready to leap on him and finish the job.

She took one step forward... Jar-don's fist bounced off the side of her head, knocking her down. She snarled, full of hot anger, and bounced to her feet. The fist again, putting her back on the ground. Then he kicked her flat. Kicked her again.

Pan-at-lee's soft mew of agony was a song in Om-at's ears. He struggled to his feet, groaning, holding his side, and stood bent over, waiting.

The two of them lay on the ground, beaten, looking up at Jar-don's man-shape, half-again the size of a waz-ho-don female. Jar-don turned and helped Om-at to step forward, arm around his father's shoulders, supporting him. Om-at smiled at the Low Women, smiled down at his mother, smiled down at O-lo-a's bloodied face.

"O-lo-a," he said. "No-name."

Fear dawned in the women's eyes then. It was to stay there for another two million years, until men and women would, at last, awaken to each other.

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**Author's Note:** The astute reader will have recognized the Pal-ul-donian dialect of the Old Hominid Speech, used here as a tribute to its creator. Though somewhat fanciful, everything in this story is compatible with current anthropological theory. The tor-o-don represent *Australopithecus boisei*, into which I have merged *robustus* and *gracilis* as sexual dimorphs. The waz-ho-don represent *Homo habilis*, who may or may not have been our direct ancestors. No one knows what happened to these species, nor why they were succeeded by the *Homo erectus* people, who had the planet to themselves.

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**William Barton** is the author of the sf novel *Dark Sky Legion* (1992), glowingly reviewed by John Clute in *Interzone* 62. His earlier books are *Hunting on Kunderer* (1973), *A Plague of All Cowards* (1976) and two novels in collaboration with Michael Capobianco, *Iris* (1990) and *Fellow Traveler* (1991). A freelance writer and computer consultant who has for many years been involved in the electronic publishing industry, he lives in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. Once upon a time he read and enjoyed Edgar Rice Burroughs's *Tarzan the Terrible* (which is a hint for those who may be puzzled by the author's note above).

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# The Same Place You Get Your Dreams

Stan Nicholls talks to Katharine Kerr

“‘F’emale fantasy writer’ has become a form of insult in some quarters,” claims Katharine Kerr. “It’s the sneer that gets launched at people like me by the hard sf writers. Good, clean, male science fiction is considered the reverse of the fantasy coin, and desirable. I don’t know how that happened, and I’m really sorry it has, because it’s nonsense.

“There are some very good women writers of hard science fiction and some very good male writers of fantasy. But in terms of sales the fantasy writers who really rake in the bucks are mostly male – David Eddings, Terry Brooks, Stephen Donaldson, Terry Pratchett, Tolkien, of course – and their audience is generally boys and young men from about 15 to 25. Women fantasy writers in America don’t get the promotion and the advances that men do.

“So the only thing I can think of is that the authors who label fantasy as female and do not like fantasy writing also consider the word ‘female’ an insult. Anything female is bad, right? Of course when you confront them with that they deny it. But I’m afraid the subtext tells a different story.”

No doubt this is true. But most sf writers who dislike fantasy do not cite gender, they point to the genre’s supposed lack of scientific rigour. “It’s not true that fantasy lacks rationality,” Kerr contends. “For example, Tolkien’s world is extremely logical, and his magicians work upon themselves, not the physical world. Gandalf is who he is because he’s a man of supreme self-control.

“My books are always as logical as I can make them. The magic used in my worlds, for example, is the kind of Cabalistic, Rosicrucian magic that was practised by Dr

John Dee, or the Golden Dawn order that W.B. Yeats belonged to. It’s rooted in the Hermetic tradition. I’ve taken out the Christian elements, because they don’t belong in my created worlds, and just used that magic, which gives you a logical basis. Magic that is inward-oriented, that has a psychology, has its own logic. It is super-logical, if you wish to call it that, or non-logical. But *illogical* it is not.

“The thing about a lot of these hard science-fiction critics is that they don’t read your books but still presume to judge you. Their model is the Terry Brooks ‘Sword of Shannara’ series. They think fantasy is all Tolkien rip-offs like that one. But you can’t argue with them. You just walk away.”

The reason behind some sf people’s hostility toward fantasy, she adds, may be resentment. “They don’t like the fact that fantasy is the oldest form of literature and science fiction is just a new twist on it.

“So much modern science fiction is fantasy when you think about it. Take faster-than-light travel. Faster-than-light travel is not an engineering problem, it is a reality problem. I’ve never heard of a physicist who wanted to challenge Einstein’s central thesis that nothing goes faster than light. So the minute you have a novel with faster-than-light travel, you’ve blown it. You’re in the land of fantasy. I mean, get off it, buddy. There’s nothing *real* about this.”

She has written a science-fiction novel herself, *Polar City Blues*, which she says strengthens rather than contradicts her case. Because it’s all fantasy, right? “Right. And in many ways there are thematic links between my fantasy novels and *Polar City*

*Blues*. They both centre around strong women characters, for instance.

“*Polar City* was conceived in a very interesting way. I had a terrible bout of bronchitis. I was feverish and couldn’t do anything but lie down. While I was lying there I got a sort of fever vision of the planet on which *Polar City* was set. I developed that image into a novel during the two weeks or so I was sick, and when I got over being sick the novel was basically written.”

Tapping the unconscious like this, although usually in a less troublesome way, is her key to creativity. “When people ask me, ‘Where do you get your ideas?’ I always say, ‘From the same place you get your dreams.’ Because the unconscious mind is always taking in data and knows everything you’re doing. I think there’s something about the human mind that impels us to produce stories. And we learn about the world by telling stories. When you hear a small child saying, ‘I’m sitting on the floor and here’s my dolly,’ what they’re doing is making a narrative out of their sensory experience. That’s one of the basic things the human mind does.

“We could even say that each of our personalities is a story we tell about ourselves. We select the memories that go into that personality, and it’s to some extent fictional, because the view we have of ourselves may not be the same one other people do. Indeed there are people who think much worse of themselves, so it’s not just ego or vanity; their narrative’s been conditioned by some terrible experience.

“So when you write, what you do is learn how to pierce that veil which keeps the unconscious stuff unconscious. You train yourself to let the veil part so that things can



go back and forth. People who are very angry, or prone to some other negative emotion either through conditioning or their own nature, can't seem to pierce that veil. They become embarrassed. I've seen that time and again when I've worked with aspiring writers. You say to them, 'Imagine a character coming into the room. What does the character do?' And they say, 'Oh, I can't do that, it's silly,' and turn red and get self-conscious. But you have to live with that kind of embarrassment in order to let the material come out."

**K**err's interest in myth and fable began in her childhood. "It really goes back to about age eleven, when a kindly relative gave me *The Child's Book of King Arthur*. It had lots of brightly-coloured pictures, and I was fascinated by the stories. We were living in Santa Barbara, southern California, which had a minuscule library, and I began haunting it at that point. I learned everything I could about King Arthur, and that leads inevitably to the whole of Celtic history, which I became very interested in as a teenager. Of course that was long before Tolkien's books were published in the United States. I read those when I was about twenty, in 1965 I think, in the bootleg paperbacks. I remember I sat up all night and read all three of them in one go.

"He is the master, of course. Everything he does, he does brilliantly. The only thing he doesn't do is write about real women, but what can you expect from an Oxford don? But, even as a feminist, I can't hold that against him because his books are wonderful. You don't expect somebody to do something they say they're not going to do. I can certainly accept that.

"Tolkien was very strong in his Christian faith and he projected that. He was an Anglo-Catholic. I was raised a Presbyterian myself, which is a horrifying thing to do to a child, and I got out of it as soon as I could. I mean, telling anybody about predestination when they're only five or six years old is really child abuse."

Tolkien's influence is so all-embracing that anyone else writing fantasy is almost automatically



Katharine Kerr

compared with him. Does she find this irksome? "Oh, of course. But the thing that irritates me most is when people say, 'Tolkien invented elves.' Tolkien would have been furious at that. He saw himself as a synthesizer of northern European (Scandinavian) mythology into a new mode. And that's exactly what he was.

"What's interesting about this is that every European culture has some form of the legend about beings who were there before us. You know, the little men who lived in the mountains; sometimes the large men who lived in the mountains. Or the wise elves. These are found in all European mythologies, stretching on into Russia.

"What if these elves, dwarves and giants are a kernel of folk memory, a story carried on from camp fire to camp fire over 30,000 or 40,000 years? 40,000 years is nothing in biological terms. So it's quite possible that this little kernel of a story about people who were there before us has been 'golden-aged'; you know, turned into the wonderful past instead of, 'They were people like us, probably'."

**K**err's first published work appeared in the gaming world, starting with features and going on to game scenarios, the best known probably being *Legacy of Blood*. "Gaming may well have had some influence on my fiction," she says, "but not in any direct way. My fiction is not gaming-style fiction, if you know what I mean. I don't mean to disparage gaming-style fiction by saying that, I'm just making a distinction. I really do enjoy gaming, and I suppose it has some tie-in with fiction in that you learn how to plan a world and to think in advance. But of course your fictional characters are so much more malleable than players. They do what you want. To some extent anyway!

"I always wanted to be a writer, and the first thing I wrote was a straight historical novel set in California in World War One, called *Catch the Shadows* (about Hollywood's silent-movie era). On the strength of that I got an agent, and she sent it to a lot of editors, all of whom loved it, but none of whom bought it because they



couldn't fit it into a publishing slot. It wasn't about anything old enough, is the way they put it.

"If it was about bordellos in the gold rush they might have been interested. But I didn't want to write about bordellos in the gold rush. As far back as I wanted to go would be those women reformers trying to clean up same, and the publishers wouldn't have been interested in that at all. Women who are strong moral forces don't loom large in American publishing."

She had written another "trunk novel," to use her expression, before *Catch the Shadows*. "It was a really horrible book about my days in Haight-Ashbury, and it's concerned with drug dealing. That one lives in a box in the closet because I just can't bear to throw it away."

"But that awful novel had the germ of a good story in it. There was one character who did kind of come alive, and the occasional paragraph was decent. But basically it's so clumsy. I hadn't written anything but letters for ten years when I started to write that. I didn't know how you structure a book, how you pace it, how long the descriptions should be, how long the dialogue should be. In that book it was all wrong. Anyone, if they start to write something, is going to get it all wrong because they haven't practised. It's like learning to water-ski or ride a horse; you're going to fall off."

"Some people come into writing with the attitude that they can't allow themselves to fall. But learning to put up with failure is the essence of technique. If I'd got half way through that first novel and said, 'That's it, it's terrifying; I'm never going to write again,' I wouldn't have become a good writer and there would be no Deverry series, etcetera, etcetera."

**K**err's first fantasy novel was published when she was 42. Was that an advantage in the sense that by that time she had something to write about? "Yes, I definitely do think that. I hope this isn't going to offend my younger readers, but, you know, when I was in my 20s the things I wrote were relatively clever but utterly empty. They certainly never would have been published."

Because the human heart I knew not of. So I think the wait was worth it, quite frankly."

Her breakthrough came, she believes, with the realization that she had to totally immerse herself in her created worlds. This added the necessary verisimilitude. "Having come up with the basic idea and characters for Deverry, I asked myself the questions, 'Who are these people? How did they get here? Where are these countries?' The first four volumes grew out of those questions and made some attempt to answer them."

"It's to do with this famous thing of suspending disbelief, both in the readers and myself. Because when you study for instance a magical system, like the one used by the Golden Dawn I mentioned, you can see it has great interior meaning even today. But to actually believe that people could turn themselves into giant birds and fly means suspending my own disbelief. I have to do that to write it believably. If I don't believe it, no one else is going to. It comes down to that."

"Then again, to write *Polar City Blues* convincingly, I had to suspend my disbelief in psionics. I really don't believe people can mindspeak the way characters in the book did. So the basic question you ask yourself is, 'Assuming it's true, how would it work?' In fantasy, or science fiction, you take an assumption and 'believe' in that assumption and ask how it would work. Then you ask yourself how it extends into the story."

"You have to live it. One of my favourite stories about people living in their books concerns Joseph Conrad. He was writing a book set in the tropics, in a London winter back in the 1880s, right after the eruption of Krakatoa had lowered the temperature. It was the coldest winter for three hundred years or something. But he got so hot he stripped to his undershorts and caught pneumonia! He was sure he was in the tropics, writing away, and his wife came in to find him feverish and pale. For that time he was working on the story he believed it was that hot. I can get almost that involved myself."

**F**antasy has been criticized for being overly self-referential. How easy is it to break out of those conventions? Indeed,

how desirable is it to do so? "I think it's very desirable. The quest is one of the archetypes I think most critics have in mind, and there is no quest in my books. The thing is that when you break away from the quest you don't sell as much, because that's what a large portion of these male readers want. I think it's an archetype that speaks to the modern male, and to some women, too. But there is something about the boy end of that scale, like 15-to-20 years old, say, which needs that archetype. It's like a spiritual vitamin of some sort."

"The feeling of a band of brothers that unites in this very moral world seems an important need. And the position of women in this kind of fiction is interesting too. They are just as good as men but they're not a sexual threat of any kind. The male characters get away from their home society but end up saving that home society. This seems to be in some way very important to young men. It definitely has informed a lot of fantasy fiction. And maybe the men who write fantasy need it themselves."

"So, although I certainly don't try to exclude male readers, I've always got a female audience in the back of my mind because I figure we've been slighted in the past. But addressing women's concerns means you don't get the publicity and promotion because it doesn't fit this male model. And you probably don't get the sales, as I say. I don't much care, although one of the difficulties in a writer's life is usually financial. But if you write a quest – boom! – instant reward. Assuming you write it under a male name, of course."

"This male/female thing is to a large extent the lingering influence of John W. Campbell. I mean, sexist doesn't even begin to describe him; misogynist would be a better word. Misogynist and of course very racist as well. He had a great deal of influence in the field and he didn't publish women in his magazine (*Astounding*, later *Analog*) and that was that."

Wasn't Kerr once encouraged to publish something under a male pseudonym herself? "Yes, *Polar City Blues*." What did she have to say about that? "I called the editor concerned a bleeding little sod, actually. I was so mad, because the central character in the book is a



woman; the second most important character is a woman too. I thought, 'Why should I publish this under a male name?' That's when I began to speculate about gender in genre, because the only answer I could get out of this editor, who shall remain nameless, was, 'Well, science fiction's a male thing.' I was just not interested in playing that game.

"It's this whole idea of, 'You don't want to publish this as a woman, do you?' Of course I do. I wouldn't have written it if I didn't, would I?"

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# Burning Bright

## Fergus Bannon

**“G**uess what I found, Professor?” When Mikey smiled his skin patterning made him look like a tree with teeth.

Still bleary from a long night's sleep, I peered into the cramped Lander's main viewpit with its perspective on the caldera. Most of the pit was filled with a 3-D back-projection of the scene below the water but an inset volume gave a wider perspective. In it the distant blue-white sun was getting low, making the caldera's jagged lip cast razor-sharp shadows across the water.

Careful scrutiny doesn't always pay in this game. Sometimes it's best to shift focus so that you're looking a little beyond. That way you don't get hung up on details. And sure enough as I stared blankly at the underwater scene I became aware of the incomplete pyramidal shapes lurking beneath the extravagant organic filigree and the overhanging collateral structures.

“Shit! Where did they come from?” I breathed.

Mikey snickered.

He was a nice kid but sometimes he irritated me. Right then I envied him his lack of experience. I'd spent too long on too many worlds mired in relentless cosmic cruelty. It had distanced me, numbed me. Of late I'd been comfortably losing altitude on the long glide to early retirement. Now was not the time to find what I'd been searching for all my life.

“What are they made of?”

“Can't say for sure yet, I was just getting the bounce beam ready. Marble possibly.”

“How many clicks to the nearest outcrop?”

“Just over twenty, and yeah they've got a channel open.”

The granite caldera was about fifty clicks in diameter and the water at the bottom was up to fifty metres deep. Until now this had been big enough for the Bugs who were about the size of your thumb. Big enough while they were blowing each other away in numberless wars, but not if they were starting to attain real social cohesion.

They looked like amoebae but weren't. Rather than evolving out like true amoebae they'd evolved in. Their single-celled bodies had gained greater internal complexity. Right at the start we'd bagged one of the little runts and analysed it, thankfully taking full biohazard precautions. We weren't biologists but our on-board AIs were pretty smart and, after their examination, pretty shocked. The cell was a mass of subnuclei

that communicated with each other mainly by percussion arrays, sending pulses through the intracellular fluid. Apart from the similarity in appearance, and the fact that it was DNA and carbon-based, it had little in common with the terrestrial amoeba.

“Let me see the channel!”

Mikey blinked up the sat-view. The channel lay like a transparent snake caught in mid-slither across the uneven terrain. It skirted the small hills and larger depressions and the clumps of sage-like plants so common on this part of the planet.

We'd seen its like before but rarely on this scale. Hundreds of channels led out between breaks in the caldera's walls making it look from the air like a giant glass octopus.

Though you could kill the better part of a score of bugs in one incautious step they ruled this mudball. Apart from plants and a few “controlled” species everything else had been eradicated. We'd found fossil evidence of vertebrates that had spread out from the other hemisphere. They'd been doing okay until they'd met the Bugs, then they'd disappeared in the flick of a geological eyelid.

I did a quick mental calculation based on the pit's calibration grids. Their pyramids would be even larger to them than ours were to us.

**I** tried to keep my voice even. “Want to estimate the cusp point?”

Mikey turned to look at me. His leaf patterning was now in autumn, giving his skin a disturbingly scalded appearance. “A month, maybe less.”

“They may not make it.”

He regarded me thoughtfully. I shuffled my sparse frame, knowing I'd lived too long and too closely with Mikey to have any success with the Emeritus Professor of Neuroarchaeology act.

“I don't get it, Dan. Why are you so...? I mean forget TV Specials. Screw the Nobel. We'll be up there with Darwin!”

I shrugged, casting around for a metaphor. It wasn't easy. “Remember your first time with a woman? You'd probably had to work pretty hard to get her where you wanted her. You'd had to overcome all your shyness and selfconsciousness. Then when everything was set, when it was all arranged and the door was about to swing open, you suddenly found you didn't want to know. Remember that?”

“Nope.”



"Define 'dread' for me, Mikey."

He hesitated. "Aged funk," he murmured and looked quickly away, fearing he'd gone too far even after all our cheek-by-jowl time together. He really wasn't such a bad kid.

"Sure," I sighed and blinked up a zoom of the channel.

Ed, our coordinating AI, had told us that the channel sections had originally been some sort of autonomous animal which the Bugs had selectively bred then bioengineered into bloated, expandable chambers with virtually no brain. Locked mouth to anus so that they formed pressure seals at both ends, they were strung out in chains to form fluid-filled Interstates for the Bugs.

Not nice, but then "nice" was a word rarely found in evolutionary vocabularies.

A timebomb cord virus was the main reason for the Bugs' supremacy. It went like this: some poor conglomerate of proteins with pretensions to vertebrate status would eat a Bug. After that it'd have a couple of months left to associate with its own primeval kind, really get a chance to spread the DNA nibbler around a bit, then it'd die, ultimately taking heaps of its misbegotten pals with it. The planet was fertile enough to support a Biodiversity Quotient about twenty times higher. The Bugs made sure it didn't.

Of course Mankind at its worst had managed to lower Earth's BQ by a similar factor, though we'd had to resort to less elegant means like deforestation and high-velocity lead. The Bugs were our kind of people.

They lived life in the fast lane. Our DNA analyses indicated they'd evolved into this form only a few tens of thousands of years ago. That they could so quickly build and sustain so complex a civilization when their lifespans lasted little more than a year implied a genetic transfer of memory. This was no small potatoes nature v. nurture-wise. We'd been working with the AIs in the struggle to crack the mechanism and see if it was transferable to other species. Say, for the sake of argument, man himself. It passed time and might make us some money but was still only a sideline for the main event. Like selling chili dogs on Krakatoa.

I watched the Bugs goading their teams of spider-like workhorses as they dragged the marble fragments over the steep lips of the pressure seals. Neither species massed much, so it was tough going.

And all this effort to build a few pyramids. The weird thing was that just about every substantial civilization on Earth and elsewhere had done the same thing at one time or another. Were pyramids really as useless as they seemed or did they form a focus, perhaps a concrete symbol of the first true externalization of thought? A sign that a species had started to look out rather than in?

Or were they just the logos of an egotistical creator slavishly recreated by its bondsmen?

The latter explanation was my bet.

As I watched the Bugs' huge endeavours I felt my first sneaking pity for the savage little brutes.

the few slender inferences we could make about the Bugs' social, philosophical, technological and bio-engineering complexity into the conglomerate models of the sixteen other alien races we'd studied up to that time. The viewpit was tuned to one of four remotes set up to scan a small sector out to the SSW of the caldera. One second it was filled with a hundred thousand or so frenetic Bugs, the next it wasn't.

I watched open mouthed as the little bodies settled slowly like sediment, drifting down between the arching tubular habitation structures and work pods to form a misty carpet on the caldera's algae-covered floor. Within minutes the gloriously coloured and convoluted aquatic plants they had cultivated in such profusion to garland their buildings began to fade.

Sickened, I rapidly flicked the viewpit through the rest of the caldera and was relieved to find the sector membranes holding. I summoned Mikey and within a few minutes he staggered in, still befuddled from his play stims. By then I'd located the ruptured industrial storage pod and had got a spectrum back from the bounce beam.

"It's some sort of chlorinated compound."

"Accident?" I felt a momentary anger at his enthusiasm. He hoped it wasn't an accident. And somewhere deep inside me where the seeker after truth still lived, neither did I.

We found the best remote angle and replayed the sequence. A single rogue, its body already attenuating from the hypermetabolic burn ("Yes!" Mikey yelled), could be seen churning its way towards the pod. A chain of pulsers, perhaps making up to ten times its mass and jerking with the Bug's frenetic efforts, slipstreamed away behind it.

We'd seen them use pulsers before. It was how they usually killed each other. Pulsers were tiny creatures bred down to be portable, their abdominal tubes focusing waves from their own internal sound generators. They produced enough energy to breach a Bug's outer membrane at a distance of a few body-lengths.

Reaching the pod, the rogue flattened out impossibly like a cartoon animal hitting an invisible wall. Bugs' bodies were flexible, but there were limits. I imagined the rogue's delicate internal structures tearing, severing nutrient pathways, shearing sound channels.

The pseudopod holding the pulser chain retracted, dragging them over the flattened face which erupted with smaller pseudopodia to greedily grasp the pulsers. Immediately the nearest section of the industrial pod began to flake under the concentrated sound waves.

Other Bugs arrived with their own pulsers. They blasted away at the rogue, causing gouts of intracellular jelly to erupt from its body. They'd almost disintegrated it when the pod burst.

There were a few seconds of silence before I looked at Mikey. "No accident."

He grinned and beat his fists against the air. "They found the Glyphics!"

"Time to send back a capsule," I said heavily.

After nearly a year and a half the compressed accommodation of the Lander was getting severely on my nerves. And so were Mikey and his bizarre enthusiasms. Stims and a mountain

In fact it took nearer three months to reach the cusp. Safe and sound in the Lander, one thousand clicks from the caldera, I actually saw it happen. I was refining Neivson's Progression, incorporating



of work kept us from tearing each other's heads off, as did the desperation which was always lurking below the surface. We were a long way from home. We were all we had.

Mikey's recent foray into Tantric Buddhism, complete with relentlessly inappropriate utterances, had vanished now the Bugs were living up to our expectations. They had become the sole focus of his attention.

He got so bad that one day I woke to find him leaning over me. As soon as I opened my eyes he started talking at me, drowning me in details about their eugenics programme.

I shoved him away and went for a walk. With full armour and scorch fields I left an incendiary path through the sparse shrub. We were under the strongest directive to remain undetected but there were no Bugs this far out so who gave a shit? The small intense sun hung high over the flat ground, making it look even flatter. The mudball was a quiet place with no really large bodies of water to give it interesting weather.

All worlds smell different though no human has ever given it a try directly, the effects of airborne alien microorganisms being too complicated to contemplate even for the AIs. But we could get the AIs to simulate it from their analyses of atmospheric gases and biomass emissions. This planet had an acrid herby bitterness which would have taken a lot of getting used to. Mikey and I had never bothered. We'd gotten used to our own emissions.

After the Bugs had reached the Glyphics stage we'd got the Orbiter to fire off a capsule, one of only three we had for communications with home. The pea-sized memory, safely enclosed in several hundred tonnes of engine, would take almost half a year to accelerate up to half light-speed. At that point it would have enough energy for the Push. An instant later the memory would be back in the Solar System, broadcasting all our findings before it continued off into deep space.

I knew only too well that the "instant" took a subjective eternity. It was as though you still had your umbilicus which you were sucked through until it inverted and you were shat out the other side. When you got to the mid-point, just before the inversion, you experienced a bleakness and an emptiness that cut through the heaviest narcotic. Nobody knew why. I was comforted by the thought that the next Push would be my last.

The limits of interstellar communication meant that it would take at least a year and a half before our colleagues arrived. The expense would be immeasurable but they'd come, of that there was no doubt.

Our application of Neivson's Progression indicated that the Bugs with their compressed developmental timescale would soon be centuries ahead of mankind. We hoped they'd learn to understand the Glyphics, perhaps even defuse them.

A filmy rainbow plane undulated through the air across my path. I stopped quickly before my leading scorch field touched it. Set on its task of mindless pollination, the plane settled over the single unspiked section of a plant to my right. Its bright colours ameliorated the cold blues of the seed heads. I magnified vision enough to see the tiny indentations on its wings where insects had nibbled at it while it fed

from the seedheads. If it was lucky it would live long enough to breed before its gossamer wing was too tattered for flight. Struggle and death. Look closely enough beneath the beauty and they were always there.

**H**umankind had first discovered the Glyphics in bacteria in the 1980s but hadn't recognized them for what they were. It wasn't until the beginning of the millennium, and the completion of that meticulous mapping and functional cross-correlation which was the Human Genome Project, that the same codon sequences, camouflaged by occasional sections of randomness, were found in man himself.

While the Push was being developed and AIs sent out to explore our nearest stellar neighbours, the bio-scientists continued to puzzle over the Glyphics. Viral tools were perfected for manipulating DNA *in vivo* and when man tentatively began to alter his own makeup, they were applied to the Glyphics.

The effects were inevitably disastrous. A massive wash of enzymes caused almost instant hyper-metabolism, with each cell and organ getting energy from its own breakdown. The rogues were always as destructive as they could be in the brief time allowed them. Even in humans, in the few experiments that had been attempted.

Of course it'd never gone as spectacularly wrong as with the Bugs, but then few ecologies were that fragile. The Bugs had only survived as long as they had because it was ingrained into them not to damage their habitat. Even their wars were fought in carefully demarcated zones.

Gingerly skirting the rainbow plane I trudged on. Looking back, I could follow my smouldering meanders back to the holographic hillock which hid the sleek arrowhead shape of the Lander. A string of projectors to the west camouflaged the five-click long tracks the landing gear had gouged in the soft ground. We'd come down a thousand clicks from the caldera, relying on a multitude of carefully disguised remotes for our studies. We'd move in closer if we felt the time was right. I looked at the charred crisscrosses Mikey and I had made on our constitucionals and laughed. Our paranoia had definitely slipped.

I wandered on and worried some more.

The Glyphics had given man pause for thought and it'd taken years before human *in vivo* bioengineering really caught on. Mikey's skin-patterning was a typical example though I feared that by the time we got back to Earth less superficial changes might have come into vogue. Providing the restructuring viruses could be tailored to keep well away from the Glyphics virtually any changes were possible if supplemented, like Mikey's, by special diets. But any attempts at neural enhancement activated the Glyphics.

Meanwhile our interstellar probes had found life to be common amongst the stars. Water-based life was *de rigueur* and so it was found to be confined to temperate zones around well-behaved single suns. None of it was both sentient and civilized, as our few manned expeditions had shown. Where species had achieved things like space travel and bioengineering they had become extinct, leaving only bone and fossilized skin for our remotes to sample for their DNA.



And DNA was everywhere. And inside it were always the Glyphics.

Aside from killing us if we tried to tamper with our own minds, what other more subtle functions did they perform? To what intellectual frameworks and perspectives did they confine us? Did they define our rationality? They clearly acted as our intellectual blinkers. What might we be capable of without this genetic graffiti?

That the Glyphics had been implanted was now widely accepted. The DNA of species on each planet had many similarities, reflecting common ancestors, but planet to planet variations were colossal. Yet the Glyphics were always there in barely altered forms, resistant unlike the millions of other codon chains to the usual mutagenetic mechanisms of radiation and chemicals.

Neuroarchaeology had been born out of humankind's perception of its prison. A science less than fifty years old, it commanded astronomical budgets to obtain the DNA of dead or nascent species.

Now by an incredible stroke of luck we'd found a species alive and about to overtake us in bioengineering terms at least. We would have to watch our trailblazers carefully.

I stopped again and scanned this unpleasant world. "Why me? Why now?" I thought. "I'm too old for the terrible truths." With a sigh, I blazed my own trail back to the Lander.

I began to wake with vague feelings of despair. Even after coming to I'd spend hours turning restlessly in my cot.

Mikey's feelings too seemed to confuse him. His natural enthusiasm, normally boundless, had become sporadic and interspersed with silence and depression. I remembered his dedication and brilliance and how by careful meticulous study he'd discovered the caldera from his analyses of the returning memories from automated probes. Though only a postgraduate student then it had earned him the right to accompany me on this expedition, leapfrogging many more senior colleagues in the process.

He still looked healthy even though his eyes seemed to reflect some awful loss. His patterning cycle excluded the greys and blacks of winter, skipping instead straight to spring. Normal flesh tones had reappeared and were becoming stippled with bright green tracings. It didn't seem appropriate.

"It couldn't be more perfect," he said to me one day during an "up" period as we chaffed through the data checking for novel developmental indices. We were in the tiny recreation area, created by retracting the partition wall between our cabins.

"I mean they're way too contained to be a threat to Earth and their technology's for shit. They haven't even colonized further than a couple of hundred clicks. We could afford real contact."

"Maybe later. If they survive."

"Easy. They're tough."

The Builders had been too, I reflected but kept it to myself. Squat and thick-skinned with lots of meat, they'd had lasers and atomics and nanotechnology. They'd chewed out vast trenches on their neighbouring planet and constructed huge generators that cracked the permafrost, making air and filling the

trenches with ocean. Then they'd disappeared within 800 years, barely five of their lively generations.

"Professor Helver, Dr Marillo," Ed interrupted gently. "I'm sorry to bother you but one of our remotes has picked up something of possible interest."

The watchword of AIs was understatement. Mikey and I exchanged glances then we were squeezing down the narrow corridor to the Obs Room. He got there first and froze. I had to stand on tiptoes to get a look. When I saw the viewpit I stumbled back in disbelief. The sudden perception of vulnerability hit me like a rock.

The scene showed a table of rock viewed from a remote at a higher elevation. Spelled out in letters made from travel tube creatures were just two words: **FREE US**

I spent the next few hours telling myself how impossible this all was. The Bugs had no electronics, no radios, no lasers. Their terrain was the organic, the microscopic. They shouldn't have been aware of our remote, they shouldn't have been aware of us. They shouldn't have understood English. Anthropomorphized Bugs was something I was just too queasy to deal with.

Ed performed long-range interrogative checks on the remote's onboard AI. He eventually came back deeply ashamed but with some answers. We listened numbly to his contrite tones.

"The Bugs up to now haven't been subterranean creatures. In fact no burrowing creatures longer than a few millimetres exist within several hundred kilometres."

"They dug a tunnel?"

"Correct. Depth scans were only performed during the first five months with no appreciable changes recorded. Attention levels were therefore distributed to more apparently significant studies."

"Didn't you detect the excavations?"

"The effect of the pulsers on the rock is minuscule. The Bugs are small, they live in a fluid medium which is highly sensitive to the planet's random seismic activity. They're intelligent enough to mimic it."

"And intelligent enough to understand English?"

"Ah, now there," said the AI very softly, "I really can't help you."

I was still pretty screwed up but I'd managed to do some thinking of my own. "I'd guess induction," I refilled my glass from the plastic bottle of Scotch we'd been working our way through. "Their bodies are full of electrolytes. If they got close enough to, say, the AIs' aerial feed they might've felt it."

Relief washed across Mikey's face. "And the AIs send back images overlaid with text. For a second there..."

"Yeah. It looked like they had a whole technology we didn't know about."

"But how could they have deciphered it?" asked Ed with some interest.

Traditionally ships' AIs displayed themselves as whirling digital patterns on screens set above the viewpits. Some sort of focus was always better than a disembodied voice. I stared at Ed's grimly.

"By altering situations in the caldera, by creating events and seeing how the remote's signals back to the ship changed. In effect by prodding and poking



you, Ed, like the cheap pile of junk you are."

"Wow! Smart or what?" Mikey took a pull on his Scotch. "And they worked it all out without computers. How the hell do they expect us to help them?"

"It's time to find out. Ed, send a message to the remote then have it sent back in case they're only tapped into the return feed. Ask them: 'How can we free you?'"

We watched the tube letters retreat then grow back. It took hours.

#### REMOVE THE POISON

By now we were too impatient for circumspect communication. Trying to clarify things, we described the Glyphics and asked if that was what they meant. We stopped them when they were half way through the laborious construction of a "Y."

"What makes you think we can remove them?" we asked. By the time the answer came back a second bottle of Scotch had been finished.

#### YOU MADE US

"No we didn't," we blithely replied, "and the Glyphics are in us too."

We never heard from them again.

I was dreaming of aching, stabbing loss when Ed's voice woke me.

"I would advise you to hurry to the Observation Room," he said.

Feeling sick and wishing I could vomit, I scuttled as fast as I could down the rat-run to the Obs Room. Mikey was already slumped over the central console.

"They're dying," he said.

It didn't seem so at first. The caldera looked to be seething with as much activity as before. Then I saw the bodies on the floor.

Normally as the Bugs died they drifted down to where teams of bioengineered scavengers would drag them to the recycling pods. The teams weren't coping now and the little corpses were beginning to accumulate.

That was the beginning of the end. It took only three months but seemed to go on for ever. As the long days passed we watched chilled and helpless as an entire species was extinguished.

I couldn't understand why we both took it so personally. The anthropomorphism created by the message had been brief. Despite their intelligence they were still brutal, alien little bugs, given to cold and calculated manipulation of other species.

So why was I grieving? Sure, they hadn't defused the Glyphics and that was a terrible disappointment but it didn't explain the crushing despair we both felt. A despair which was somehow intriguingly familiar, yet difficult to pin down.

By the time the population had decreased by ninety percent the medical AI was starting to fuss about mission termination. Mikey's hideous patterning couldn't disguise his weight loss. Sleeping pills were getting less and less effective. We were drinking more and more. The stims had lost all attraction.

"Gentlemen," Ed said one day, "if we left now it would take ten months and six days to get you to full medical facilities. At your present rate of deterioration you might only just make it. I must insist we leave immediately."

Mikey, drawn and weary, was lying slouched in a

corner. He hadn't spoken for days. I was curled up in my inertia web. I had no idea how long I'd been there.

It was clear that the Bugs would never now recover, so there was little point in staying. We also had a good reason to return home, though it was something we only dared consider tangentially. The Bugs' collapse had been on the Neivson Scale at a point about one hundred and twenty years ahead of mankind's. We'd estimated the error at plus or minus one hundred and fifty years.

"OK, Ed," I said. "Do your stuff!" It was just as well we weren't expected to fly the thing. I had enough trouble strapping a febrile Mikey into his web for takeoff. He grasped my hand.

"Why?" he asked. "Why did they all have to die?" I gently stroked his hair but could give him no other comfort.

His question stayed with me. It wasn't until afterwards, after the takeoff, after the docking with the main engine in orbit round the planet, after the five interminable months of acceleration and our increasing dementia, and finally the horrors of the Push itself, that I had the terrible epiphany that gave me the answer to it all.

As soon as we were back in the Solar System we started to recover. Decelerating, we picked up tight-beam radio messages. Humankind was still forging ahead, unaware as yet of its fate. Though a source of great relief I knew it wasn't the main reason for our improving health.

Mikey stared at me intently over the meal table. He was still about twenty kilos down on his normal weight. He'd long since ceased his dietary supplements and his skin was made up of pink and green blotches.

I stared morbidly at my hand clutching the glass. Bony and shrivelled from the wasting, it reminded me of a bird's claw.

"Well?" asked Mikey, his voice weak and high. The muscles in his face were too attenuated to convey much expression other than a gaunt emptiness. Somehow he'd sensed I knew something and he'd kept on at me during the brief, infrequent periods he talked at all. I didn't want to explain. I knew once I started I'd be made to do it again and again for the rest of my life.

I took a deep breath. "I think the Bugs reached the end of their useful life."

This was the only thing he was interested in so I used it. I deliberately waited so he had to communicate. It worked.

"Useful for who?"

I shrugged. "I couldn't even guess."

More silence until finally: "The ones who inserted the Glyphics?"

I nodded. "I think the Glyphics act like a fuse, or a tamper switch or a limiter. Get too clever, mess with them and your species goes down the drain."

It took about a minute but finally he asked me to go on.

"You must have felt it when we made the Push. The same kind of coldness and emptiness as when the Bugs died."

"We were there when a whole intelligence was extinguished. No man has ever experienced that



before. On Earth we live our lives right at the heart of an intelligence that is so all-pervading we're totally unaware of it. It's only during the Push, when for an instant we're in interstellar space, that the ambience momentarily diminishes. That difference is enough to wither us, creatures of the bright light that we are. Try and imagine what a complete absence of that sustenance would be like, and not just for an instant but for eternity.

"I think for the beings who implanted the Glyphics we're just background illumination. They've strung the stars with sources of intelligence, like lights on a Christmas tree, or maybe campfires to ward off the cold. But fires can't be allowed to burn too hot, they can't be allowed to get out of control. The Bugs realized that at the end. They were smarter than us and that's probably why they died. Maybe it's not the limiter that kills you but the awareness of it."

Mikey had lapsed into a silence from which he would never emerge. I didn't know that at the time so I shrugged and continued. "Whatever happens we won't be allowed to develop further. Perhaps if we can learn to accept it we might survive."

I didn't believe it, then or now. The Glyphics *make* us strive, *make* us chafe against the chains. Intelligence is a matter of struggling to push back the limits.

The belittling awareness of ultimate limitation, reached now and not at some faraway endpoint in humankind's glorious future, will eat its way into our collective psyche. It'd killed the Builders in five of their generations, the Bugs in barely two of theirs.

I'm not sure we'll take that route. I don't think we'll just lie down and die, but at the same time we're not great when it comes to acceptance. Far from it. We rebel against everything sooner or later.

In the future I see great genocidal armadas setting sail across the gulfs of space to extinguish some of the other bright "lights" in a vain attempt to signal our defiance to the gods.

Of course it won't do any good. After all, would you tolerate any defiance from a light bulb?

---

**Fergus Bannon** lives in Glasgow. He is employed as a scientist in the health service, which puts him up there with the panda on the Endangered Species list. Before settling down to a career of blood and gore he served with the merchant marine and visited many of the world's tastier trouble spots such as Chile, Panama and South Africa. Nowadays he gets his thrills by having his stories reviewed by the Glasgow SF Writers Circle, a process he likens to coming to terms with a major illness (anger, denial, despair, then acceptance). He would like to take this opportunity to thank them for three years of well-reasoned abuse. (Yes, the man previously best known for his story "The Unusual Genitals Party" [see review by Neil Jones and Neil McIntosh in IZ 52] wrote most of this author's note himself - Ed.)

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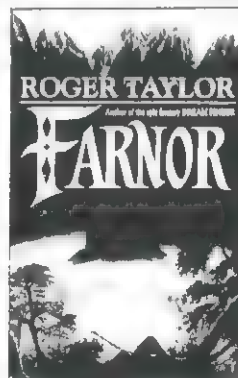
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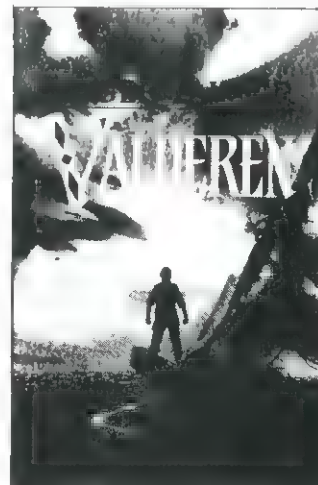


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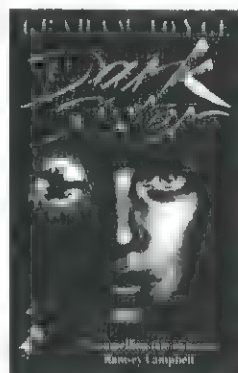
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## HEADLINE



# Ansible Link

## David Langford



**D**r Samuel Johnson responded to the various affronted and review-challenged sf writers I've quoted here and elsewhere: "An author places himself uncalled before the tribunal of criticism, and solicits fame at the hazard of disgrace." Well, he would say that, wouldn't he?

### A Miscellany of Men

*Judge Dredd* is to expand remorselessly from his comic strips into spin-off novels from Virgin Books. One authro's proposal, however, was given the thumbs-down by Dredd's owners Fleetway on the basis that it portrayed the Judge as a brutal, ruthless, heartless, fascist bastard, whereas (to widespread noises of amazement) he's not that kind of guy at all. The author bounced back with a cuddlier characterization, no doubt filled with appeasing lines like "Drokk! Take that!, er, please, ma'am..." Meanwhile it seems the Dredd novel contracts have an alarming descending royalty scale – since Fleetway's percentage rises so sharply with sales that everyone else has to help absorb it. As my informant naughtily put it: it's good pay for not reading their own comics, if their idea of Judge Dredd's character is anything to go by.

Patrick Nielsen Hayden, editor at Tor Books, freezes my soul with a flyer about *Nude Trek 2: The Wrath of Klothes*, the first nudist Star Trek convention, run by The Slugs Nudist Club in chilly Washington State (January 1993). Perhaps the most macabre aspect is his covering note: "Not a hoax."

Laurence James could only be persuaded to say, of the sensational *Dark Future* hearing reported last issue (which removed his entire series of young-adult books from sale): "The judgment reminds me of the infamous Schleswig-Holstein issue. Which I'm sure you'll recall was so complex that only three men ever understood it. One went mad, one is dead and the third has forgotten..."

Christopher Priest, though toiling dutifully on his new novel *The Blind Ear*, is a media man these days...with a three-part TV drama serial called *The Cull* commissioned by BBC2 and his

own dramatization of *The Glamour* completed for BBC Radio 4 (as I write, it is scheduled for Easter Monday). The recording of *The Glamour* sounds like fun: in CP's own words, "A highlight was listening to the effects people build up a car bomb from scratch, beginning with a dynamite explosion (sounded a bit like a door slamming), then layers added to give echo, reverberation, windows shattering, metal lumps skidding down the road, ground juddering, windows rattling, people screaming, alarm bells going. When this was played to the actors, two of them ducked – I too jumped out of my skin, and I knew it was coming! The BBC people were so pleased with it that they put it into the effects library. Me: 'Here, that's my car bomb!' They: 'Sorry, squire, it's ours now.'" One sound that did defy the BBC effects men was that of a ring-pull beer can; the lateral-thinking solution was to nip out to a vending machine for a few Cokes.

David Redd of past *Interzone* fame is still battering at the editorial defences of *New Worlds*, and reports an exciting breakthrough: this time the story came back but the covering letter is to be quoted in David Garnett's NW editorial. Thus encouraged, Mr Redd is thinking of giving up fiction and embarking on a career of writing covering letters.

William Shatner was a winner in 1992's uncoveted and corruptly voted Hugu (sic) spoof awards, in the category "Best Dead Writer." (By hallowed tradition, this one is invariably awarded to a living author.) The Hugo trophy is a little rocket on a distinctive base; the Hugu is a bit of wood with a scorchmark where the rockets has supposedly taken off. Among the other winners were our very own Lionel Fanthorpe ("Banger Award" category, whatever that might be) and that perennial favourite *The Last Dangerous Visions* ("Invisibility Award").

### Infinitely Improbable

*The Philip K. Dick Award* will presumably have eventuated, or disembogued, or whatever it does, by the time this appears. Its shortlist comprises Colin Greenland's *Take Back Plenty*, Richard Grant's *Through the Heart*, Elizabeth Hand's *Aestival Tide*,

R.A. Lafferty's *Iron Tears* and Elisabeth Vonarburg's *In the Mothers' Land*.

Ten Years Ago... a Californian rare-book auction featured asbestos-bound editions of both *Fahrenheit 451* and *Firestarter*, though not alas the legendary *Complete Works of H.P. Lovecraft* bound in gorgonzola.

*Clarke's Law Updated*: according to Jeff Swycaffer, quoted in a US fanzine, "Any technology distinguishable from magic is insufficiently advanced."

*Futurology Corner*. Sf writers extrapolating the future need to take account of the plague of misplaced apostrophes now raging through the English language like devouring flames, or flame's, as it is now spelt. A spy reports a "Swiss" bakery in Teignmouth that advertises gateau'x. The trend is clear. Sf novels set centuries hence will lose all credibility unless they begin something like this: *Twenty year's ago the mighty spacefleet's of the United Galaxie's were plunged into chao's...* (Copyright *Interzone* 1993; all right's res'erved.)

Updates on my previous column will make no sense without *Interzone* 70, ho ho... David Garnett sent minor corrections to the bit on the Games Workshop/Boxtree/Transworld lawsuit, in particular that despite the rumours GW's ISBN numbers were valid (but the books weren't registered with Books in Print), that the Boxtree launch was excitingly delayed to February and that some *Dark Future* reissues are indeed planned later in the year. Kim Newman (after revealing how *Interzone* authors habitually pass their time: "I've been up an Alp at a film festival drowing in complimentary champagne and French babes, both of which have unadvertised down-sides") added that he'd never much liked the *Dark Future* series title which has just been so expensively defended, and felt his books were hamstrung rather than helped by the GW games tie-in. Guy N. Smith shyly reports that his fan club costs £10 a year or £25 for life – and what's more, you get 10% off rare Smith editions, including foreign ones. Amaze your friends with the Polish for (*Phobia* (*Fobia*), *The Sucking Pit* (*Trzesa-wisko*), *Fiend* (*Szatan*) and *Crabs on the Rampage* (*Odwet*)...



# Castalia

## Don Webb

**T**here's a park near Smithville, Texas – a park of fourteen hundred acres – bordered by the University of Texas/M.D. Anderson Research Park on the north. I've often wondered what they research there behind their high chain-link fence in the middle of thousands of acres of piney woods. In the park only a few yards from Park Road 1C is a sulphur spring with the green and white park sign, "Water Not Suitable for Drinking" with the logo of a silver-grey faucet encircled by a red circle and bar. Across the sign someone had pocketknife-cut "Castalia."

My wife Sarah and I were on one of our Monday picnics. We schedule our work weeks for Tuesday through Saturday – one of the advantages in working for a large multinational: since they work in all time, you can often work in any. Mondays are great for picnics. The parks often exist for you alone. She was driving our green Ford Taurus and I suggested we pull off at Picnic Site No. 2.

She turned the car down into the pebbled road between the live oaks and pines. I could see the silvery water. I thought this would be a good spot haunted by cool moist breezes. It was over a hundred degrees, but with shade and breeze it could be pleasant. We stepped from our car's AC into the fetid sulphur smell. We knew about sulphur springs, mud volcanoes, and sour water. There are scores of places in East and Central Texas that look back to the lush rolling years of the Jurassic. We laughed at our bad luck and laid our seedless grapes, sparkling water and Pepperidge Farm cookies on the wooden table. We decided to go look at the spring.

**A**t some time there had been a road right up to the spring. The park service had half-buried cypress logs to keep wheeled vehicles out. The spring bubbled out of an ancient feature of Texas geology, the Llano Uplift. The soil and rocks were all variety of iron – black magnetite, yellow limonite, red hematite, and the purplish-pink stone known as Llanoite. Everything was brown and yellow and red. Except for the spring. It pushed eight or nine inches into the air, bubbling white with the pressure of the Earth. Its foul-smelling water sparkled over long streamers of green and white algae. The algae grew like mermaid's hair from the rocks. I had never seen anything so intensely green... but it wasn't the green of plant life. There was something *other* about it. The

white strands were purely white. A glance at Sarah told me she had never seen its like. I felt the first adulterous urge I had ever felt in seven years of marriage. I wanted this spring – or at least the other-  
ance of the spring – for myself.

I said, "That green and white moss is common to sulphur springs throughout Central Texas." I had lied so she wouldn't know what a marvel this was. The spring was mine now. She would never think of it – save for a vague memory of the green. She would accept my lie, of course. I am a geologist for the world's largest oil company. Wells are sunk at my word.

"Let's go back and eat," said Sarah. "I'm going to wash up first."

She stepped toward the spring. Then she saw the "Not Suitable for Drinking" sign. It was hard to believe anything as bubbly light-filled as the spring could be poisonous. She read the sign.

She said, "I think there's a restroom by the next picnic site. Coming?"

I nodded no. I went to the picnic table and sat facing the spring. Sarah is 101-percent urban. She crashed her way toward the brown stone latrine. She couldn't miss a dried stick or crackling leaf. The door banged behind her. I contemplated getting a sample of the spring water, but if I had it analysed and it was different – then the place would swarm with chemists, scientists, and government. If it weren't different, then I'd lose something rare.

A shadow shifted in the forest. The shadow became a woman in a tattered dress grey as shadow. Her hair was grey, but she seemed young and vital. She did not see me. Only the spring. When she was close enough, she bent down to drink deeply. She looked up, looked directly at me, nodded and fled back into the forest.

I had seen a madwoman drink a no doubt fatal dose of poisonous water. How was I to explain this to Sarah or to the park guards? How could I explain my silence, my complicity in her act?

And her eyes were as green as the strange water growth.

Auburn-haired Sarah crashed back to our table. I told her I couldn't stand the sulphur smell any longer, and would it be OK if we found another table.

We moved on and crunched our cookies by the scum-covered lake. After the picnic was the usual searching in local thrift shops. We hoped that we



would excel in our finds, since the park was relatively unsatisfactory we might balance our leisure day economy by superior luck in our other vice – that of thrift shopping. We pulled up the white-gravel drive to a series of frontless buildings which served as the local junktique boutique. Sarah went for the records and I to the books, and the unmatched dishware languished alone.

The hardbacks were twenty-five cents each and I got four: *Family Exercise Book* by Imohotep Scott, *Scottish Mythology* by James Chisholm, *The Revenge of the Triangle* by Florence Ballard, and *Classical Mythology* by Morford and Lenardon. Sarah made out as well with two albums of 78 phonographs for her Phillips Cobramatic. And so we drove away into the burnt orange sunset of that happy Monday and beyond into the workaday world.

I didn't think of the madwoman at the spring for a week. Since I had resolved not to speak of it, it seemed to slip from my mind. I wonder if memory needs to be invoked orally as the ancient poets used to do? It was Sunday night and we were plotting our Monday adventure. I suggested we visit the park again. Sarah was surprised, since we had had such a bad time there. And I was surprised, because till I spoke I had forgotten the madwoman.

I told her I was just joking.

We picked a park in the city. We would buy barbecued chicken and Thai noodle salad from our favourite deli. We would swim afterward.

Our plotting done, Sarah went to bed. I hadn't seen anything in the papers about strange bodies turning up. Surely if the woman had died, there would have been a report. Maybe she had adapted to the spring. I read once (in a René Dubos book) about an African tribe who had adapted to drinking salt water from a saline spring. The human organism can always be pushed to new limits.

I paced around our apartment. I wanted to drive seventy-five miles and see the spring by three-quarter moonlight. I paced by the bookcase and I picked up *Classical Mythology*. I would relax with the Greek myths – something I hadn't touched since high school twenty years ago. I parked myself on our white plush couch and thumbed through the sections on Hesiod and Ovid. I settled on Silander, a minor Alexandrian poet, whose long poem *Krypticon* dealt with the origin of language, poetry, letters, and prophecy. His work has been connected with sorcery, and he generally enjoys a bad reputation. Book Two (of the twelve) dealt with sacred springs and rivers. Dirce, Castalia, Nilus. I chose the passage on Castalia, the sacred spring near the volcanic vent of Pytho. At Pytho a priestess called the Pythia, sat on a tripod over the miasmic vent. The fumes would intoxicate her and make her utter strange prophecies. It was also the bathing spring of the nine Muses. A sample of Silander's verse was included:

*Mother Ge rent herself,  
And strange fumes roiled from the wound.  
The great serpent glided forth  
To be nursemaid to monstrous Typhon.  
In her trail came the holy streams  
Where the Nine gather to drink*

*Water of living darkness.  
Black water of my scrying bowl.  
Ink of poems unwritten.  
Before the mysteries of Castalia  
I close my eyes with holy dread.*

Hera, incensed that Zeus had borne Athena without the aid of a woman, did conceive Typhon without the aid of man. The young god was monstrous to behold so Hera hid him in a cave. She begged her grandmother to protect the hideous baby. Ge gave birth to Python, who acted as nursemaid. Python's birthwater became the spring Castalia, said to be the mouth of the Styx.

Typhon grew to godhood and went forth to vex and trouble mankind. Python, now lonely, asks her mother Ge for companionship. Ge cannot birth any more monsters, for the age of Chaos is over. Ge, however, sends vapours which reveal the future so that Python might be amused – watching the folly of mankind through the long centuries. Furthermore she caused the stream Castalia to become enchanted so that any who drank of it would become excellent in the arts and sciences. Python grew vast, nourished by the stream. Her coils covered acres of ground, obliterating vineyards and fields. Starving humanity called upon Apollo to slay the monster.

Python knew that the god would kill her. But she knew all of history and this was equivalent to immortality – since there was nothing new for her to experience. The sun god's arrows penetrated her heart, and she died. Apollo returned to high Olympus after establishing his own priesthood at the oracular vapours. The great serpent rotted – for the verb *pytho* means, "I rot." Despite the great stench, the Muses came to drink at the spring for art begins with death. Silander carefully points out that the Nine Muses are neither friends nor enemies of mankind – for just as they taught blind Homer his song, they also taught the Sphinx her riddle. He says that these Unknown Nine merely direct the black streams of mystery – which he also called the sense of wonder – from Hades across the world. They love and reward those that seek after the mysteries, but to those who refuse to embrace the unknown as a lover, they send hideous dreams and tormenting thoughts of "What if?"

I put the book aside. I went into the bedroom and lay beside Sarah. Sleep was a long time in coming.

Tuesday morning I was at my office fifteen minutes early as usual. I like the quiet minutes, when I can organize my day. I pull up my files, send my requests for data throughout the company's worldwide network, and plot my strategies for the day's various problems. I had an idle moment or two. I punched up survey records for Central Texas. We have everywhere including public parks and palace grounds.

The records scrolled across my screen. A survey had been commissioned in 1923. The surveyor was Gabriel Thorn. He had done most of the Texas hill country, but he didn't finish this job. No one had flagged the file and whoever transferred it to tape wasn't bothered that a few acres had escaped company scrutiny. I copied the records on my PC's hard disk and went about my day.



On Thursday I had the happy thought that an uncompleted survey was really company business. No one would question my running down a file. It might be seen as a quirky sort of efficiency. I called in Linda Hamic and asked her to put together a Gabriel Thorn file. Linda's an efficient, if spooky, researcher. She truly loves the dark archives of company lore. She got a prominent notice in *Paperclip*, the company newspaper, while researching some Amazonian records. It seems that our original crew had met with a tribe of headhunters. Brazilian authorities had brought the primitive criminals to justice. They'd mailed the shrunken heads back to the company. The small box had waited sixty years for Linda to pull it out of a rusting file cabinet in a sub-basement. She keeps one of the heads at her workstation. Scares away people collecting for flowers.

I faxed a request to Houston for a satellite map of the area.

Then I read through my daily memos. Corporate headquarters have been worried about our image since the spills. The internal memos were vague and endless. Basically they wanted us to exude the odour of sanctity. Finally I got down to work – ordering core samples from the hinterlands of Belize.

On Friday morning the mail robot rolled by my desk. I picked up a giant fax of the park and the latest *Paperclip*: *It Holds Everything Together*. I managed to read the newspaper first. I needed to show some restraint. The lead article speculated on the Shining Path's ability to overthrow Peru. Politics is a low-level game for the company. If we wanted to, we would keep our wells in the Kingdom of the Sun. There was the usual dreck. Who's getting their five-year pin, their ten-year pin, their fifty-year pin. Some refinery worker's recipe for three-alarm chili. I tossed the newspaper into the trashcan and I unfolded the map.

It was easy to spot the spring. It was hard to deal with what I saw.

Around the spring – in broad curves – was a spiral. Not a product of glaciation, which never reached this far south. Not a fault pattern. Not weathering. Something had lain there. Something heavy and monstrous had lain there millennia ago. Its weight had depressed stone, reshaped the bedrock, cut across creek beds. I couldn't say if it was the sacred snake of myth. But something big and coiled.

I wondered how many places had had their dragons. Was the mystery of Castalia enacted at many sacred sites? Were there more sulphur springs guarded by dragons?

I could've requested data on sulphur springs worldwide. I contented myself with the original Castalia, mouth of the Styx. Most of the Grecian survey had been done by Mussolini's men during the Italian occupation. The Axis powers were thirsty for oil. I also asked for a satellite photo centred on Pytho and extending twelve kilometres beyond Mt. Parnassus.

Linda Hamic walked in with that gleam in her eye. She'd found something spooky – something that appealed to her taste for the macabre.

"I've put together a file on Gabriel Thorn. I got everything from the farrier's bill for shoeing his horse to the address of the insane asylum he died at," she said.

I wasn't going to snatch the bait just yet. "The farrier's bill?"

"You didn't survey Central Texas in an automobile in the 1920s. No roads into the back country and the roads between the cities were subject to flooding. So CenTex Petroleum gave their surveyors a horse maintenance account."

"Why do we keep the data?"

"Certain sections of central Asia might best be surveyed by a combination of jeeps, horses, satellites, and seismograph teams if we can negotiate the rights from the nations involved. We'll need baselines for budgeting for horse maintenance."

"OK. Now the juicy bits. The asylum? What was it? Syphilis?"

"Mr Thorn's last commissioned survey was TC1296-TC1369, private forest land later acquired by the State of Texas for Bluecher State Park. He rode out on the twenty-ninth of August and was expected back on the fourth of September. When he had not returned by the tenth, the President of CenTex Petroleum contacted the Texas Rangers. The Rangers plus a local sheriff's posse combed the area. Mr Thorn was found dancing by his slaughtered horse."

"Dancing?"

"With wild abandon. It took the sheriff and a couple of his boys to hold Thorn down. He seems to have lost the power of speech or at least he wouldn't answer their questions. Because of the violent nature of his movements he was taken to the State Asylum at Austin. He died six months later when an overzealous guard shot him during an escape attempt. The CenTex board decided not to have the area surveyed as there might be some hidden danger to putative work crews. I've included the minutes of their meeting in the file."

"Linda, you're amazing."

"Yes, sir. I am. I think this would make a good article for the *Paperclip*."

"Could – em, could you hold off on that article for a couple of months?"

"Well, there's no pressing need for it. Please tell me what you find. Good luck."

She smiled, handed me a manila folder full of documents, and left. If she can ever tear herself away from that haunted library of hers, she'll be running this company.

I glanced through the minutes. Samuel Mercer, president of CenTex, told how messy and muddy Thorn was. How in spite of the caked mud in his hair, his movements were beautiful. The sheriff and his men had been reluctant to capture him. "It just didn't seem right." Thorn – or at least Thorn's Bowie knife – had slit his horse's throat.

The photos of Castalia came in in the afternoon. There was the same dragon pattern. If the dragon was common to both sites – why not the Muses? The Nine dance by moonlight according to Silander. Maybe Thorn or the madwoman had seen the dance and been driven mad. But they didn't know what to expect, they hadn't steeled themselves for such terrible beauty.

This Sunday the Moon would be full. I had seen it three-quarters full last Sunday evening.



I told Sarah that my hard drive had crashed on Saturday afternoon. I'd have to go in Sunday night to upload my backup disks. I might be gone all night. I gave her a peck. The sun was setting in burnt orange glory when I drove my pickup out of Austin.

The park was closed when I got there. I drove back to the highway and parked under a huge pine garlanded with Spanish moss. I climbed on top of my car and leapt over the barbwire. The moon was beginning to rise, but it was still difficult to see. I limited my flashlight use hoping to avoid the park ranger's attention. After five minutes of cautious jogging I could hear the spring. I slowed my pace and corrected my direction.

"We've been waiting for you. We hoped you would come tonight."

A shadow voice, and there in the shadows two green eyes glowing like a cat's. She moved slightly so that I was able to make her out from the background.

"We knew you would come. I told the others that you could see me. After you've been here a while they can't see you by daylight."

I asked, "Are you one of the Nine?"

She laughed and said, "There are only eight of us now and we need another. No I'm not one of the Nine. We are only vessels. They come to dance, but they need bodies. This has been going on for a long time – long before there were men. They've used trees, birds, the serpent, and other things that you're not ready to comprehend. Come, drink of the spring so you will be ready."

"I'm not going. I know what happened to Thorn."

"There have been hundreds since Thorn yet we remember him. He is here." She pointed at her temple. "Our physical lives are shortened by the dance, but the whole of our beings are sucked into the Nine. You must hurry, when the moonlight hits the spring they come. You must be ready."

"I'm not going."

"Stay and watch the dance. Then you'll see. Come."

"Who are you?"

"My old name doesn't matter any more. The Nine know how to find me. That's what's important."

She took me by the arm. The others were laying around the spring. They barely moved even to breathe. All the colour had been drained from them. The oldest wore what might have been a '60s mod outfit.

I found a boulder to sit on.

And waited.

The moon slowly rode across the sky. How many people danced here? Americans, Spanish, Lippan Apache. She had said that trees had danced. Had the need for "vessels" changed humans into what they are – the memory of the Nine being the original impulse to Art? But Silander warns that the Nine are not the friends of men.

Then the moonlight touched the spring. Each bubble glowed like a star. Nine fine tendrils of light came out of the spring. Eight of them swirled into the men and women laying around the spring. A ninth darted toward me, but stopped inches away. It moved up and down – seeking a point of entry. Then it shot back to and within the spring.

The eight stood up. They joined hands and began to circle the spring. Their movements increased in speed and suddenly their feet were beginning to leave the ground. Their legs lifted behind them while their heads and hands bent toward it. They hung in the air a moment then they began shooting away from the disc. Then the dance began. It involved every movement of the classical repertory, of belly dancing, of popular dancing forms. It involved the trees and stones and curves of local space. It invoked every human emotion and some moods that humans lack words for. I knew that I would be spending the rest of my life trying to express those feelings.

There was flight and crawling, the erotic and the frightening, there was tumbling and moments of exquisite statuary stillness. I realized that this dance took part of its shape from the position of Earth, Moon, Sun, and the slowly drifting continents. I knew this dance was occurring at sulphur springs under the sea – danced by strange creatures for which science has no name. I knew it was danced in the Arctic, in deserts, and in jungles. Perhaps even on other planets.

All this I knew from the dance.

"Hey – what are you jokers doing?"

The words were like boulders, crashing white into my mind. A woman park ranger had come up behind us. I felt as if my skin had been ripped away.

At the park ranger's yell, the bodies fell to the earth. She'd broken their concentration and their misstep had halted the dance all over the world. I wanted to kill her. I wanted to kill her more than if I had seen her bash a baby's head on the asphalt. I picked up my boulder, but the eight were quicker. Light streamed from the tops of their heads. The eight bands coalesced into a harsh bright rod. The ranger was undoing the leather buckle which held her gun when the light struck. The great light probed her like the lesser light had probed me. It forced its way in. Her body hadn't been fortified by the spring. The great rhythm began to make her move. There was a beauty in her dance – like the colours and symmetries of an A-bomb explosion. Light began to pour from her eyes, from her mouth, from her sex, from each strand of her hair. The rhythm increased. I became aware of the boulder I was holding. I let it drop in front of me. Her skin began to rip and her bones to tear. But still she had the look of fierce ecstasy that the eight had had. The light left her and she fell boneless like a one-year-old falls.

The great light poured back into the spring. I could smell her blood and entrails over the sulphur stench.

The eight had gone to whatever hiding place where they wait for their monthly chance at Heaven. I thought of all the ways the Nine had been represented by mankind – the muses, the Nine Unknown (said by Tibetan Lamaists to rule the earth), the Ennead of the Egyptians, Odhinn and his eight other forms. All derived from the burning dance of ecstasy, a dance that certain hidden springs in certain hidden places could cool. I could join them. I could be One of the Nine at least for the moment of the dance.

I thought of my wife, and of my marriage, which had cooled into an eternal afternoon. Like endless croquet. Did I want comfort or ecstasy? Or did I just want the one moment of knowing what no one else knew – the one moment of the pale fire of knowing a



mystery, but not being part of it. That was it. I wouldn't die in the fire of unknowing, but I would always know of the mystery behind all things.

I pulled out my pocket knife and recut the spring's true name in the sign. I threw three handfuls of earth over the body of the fallen dancer. Let the natural order reclaim what belongs to it – just as the unnatural fire which sets artists apart had reclaimed its share. I drove my white Chevy pickup back to town. There was nothing to connect me with the ranger's death. I thought about the ecstasy in the faces of the dancers. I hadn't drunk from Castalia. Silander was right. The Nine are neither friends nor enemies of mankind. But in my mind how the spring glistens.



**Don Webb**, unlike most of the other writers represented in this issue, has been published in *Interzone* many times before: "Rhinestone Manifesto" (issue 13), "Djinn" (issue 41), "Reach Out" (issue 49), "The End of the World" (issue 52), "Not of This World" (issue 56). He is one of the more individualistic citizens of that other planet known as Austin, Texas.

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# Tube Corn

## Television Reviews by Wendy Bradley

If I were Keith Szarabajka I'd get a new agent.

No, I know you think you've never heard of him but you'd recognize him if you saw him. He was Edward Woodward's sidekick in *The Equalizer* for one thing. It was one of those unrewarding sidekick roles, you know, the younger, fitter but less famous helper of an older, porkier but much more famous protagonist; the kind of role where you have to spend an entire episode crashing around in the duct-work trying to break in to rescue your boss only to turn into comic relief when he rescues himself five seconds earlier and then berates you for your lateness. A role, in fact, rather like that good looking Hispanic guy had in *T.J. Hooker*, where you do all the leg-work and then get shot in the shoulder just before William Shatner gets to do the actual grandstand hero stuff.

How nice then, I thought when I saw the listings, for Keith Szarabajka to get a starring role for himself, even if it is only in a mini-series. And then I watched **Stephen King's Golden Years** and my goodness! Not only did he not play the hero, not only did he not even get his usual sidekick role, but to add insult to injury he was reduced to playing a mere McGuffin. Yes, that was Szarabajka, buried under a pound and a half of latex wrinkles and pursued across America by the psychopaths trying to take him away from the perky Girl-from-Uncle type who was trying to keep him out of the grips of the Evil Scientist who wanted to Do Experiments on him. When you open your script and find you don't even get a line for twelve and a half pages you must begin to ask yourself whether a "starring..." credit is enough. I hope he at least got serious money.

I confess I didn't join this series until episode three but I was immediately hooked by the quirky humour glued in between the gung-ho stuff, as though we were watching "The A-Team Go to Twin Peaks." Stephen King himself gave a cameo performance as the grumpy bus driver, but the real joy was the evil scientist trying to get another eighteen inches of cable out of the jobsworths in supplies. Never argue with Stores: they first sent him the wrong kind of connector but then, because he had snatched that one out of the storeman's hands without signing the requisition in untplicate, they made him sign page after page after page after page to get another. Then there was the blind daughter who had "connections" with the "underground" – a house full of leftover hippies, where the good guys could hide out for a while, confident that there would be a handy storm drain through which they could make their getaway while the hippies tried to fend off the psychopaths by standing in a circle chanting "om."

The plot, however, was something else. I mean, maybe it was just me, maybe they explained everything in episode one, but I could never get the hang of just what exactly was happening. Szarabajka, covering in wrinkles and a syrup to look seventy-something, was the janitor who got blown up in the explosion in the lab and got the fallout from the mysterious experiment. Instead of developing the statutory superpowers, however, he simply started to peel off the face furniture and get younger. He, his wife and the Girl from Uncle then fled for four episodes from the Psychopath – you could pick him out from the black gloves and the sinister way he kept toying with a garotte in the

title sequence – who wanted to hand him back to the mad scientist. However, as a passing truck driver remarked, "this guy's full of green light!"

Indeed, as he was hitching across America Szarabajka developed a disconcerting habit of rolling up his eyes and going green, which together with a propensity for starting small earthquakes and making the sun go backwards in the sky would serve, one felt, to make him a trifle conspicuous. But no, after earthquaking and green-lighting all over the place we would simply cut to the next scene and he would reappear without the special effects the next time he was needed. Personally if I ever find myself in an explosion in a secret laboratory I shall begin sewing the superhero costume before the dust has settled but, no, all they seemed to want to do here was be inconspicuous and live happily ever after. How could a person not even try leaping tall buildings with a single bound given the opportunity? Ah, well. In the end he simply vanished in a puff of green smoke, taking his spouse with him to, well, neverneverland one assumes.

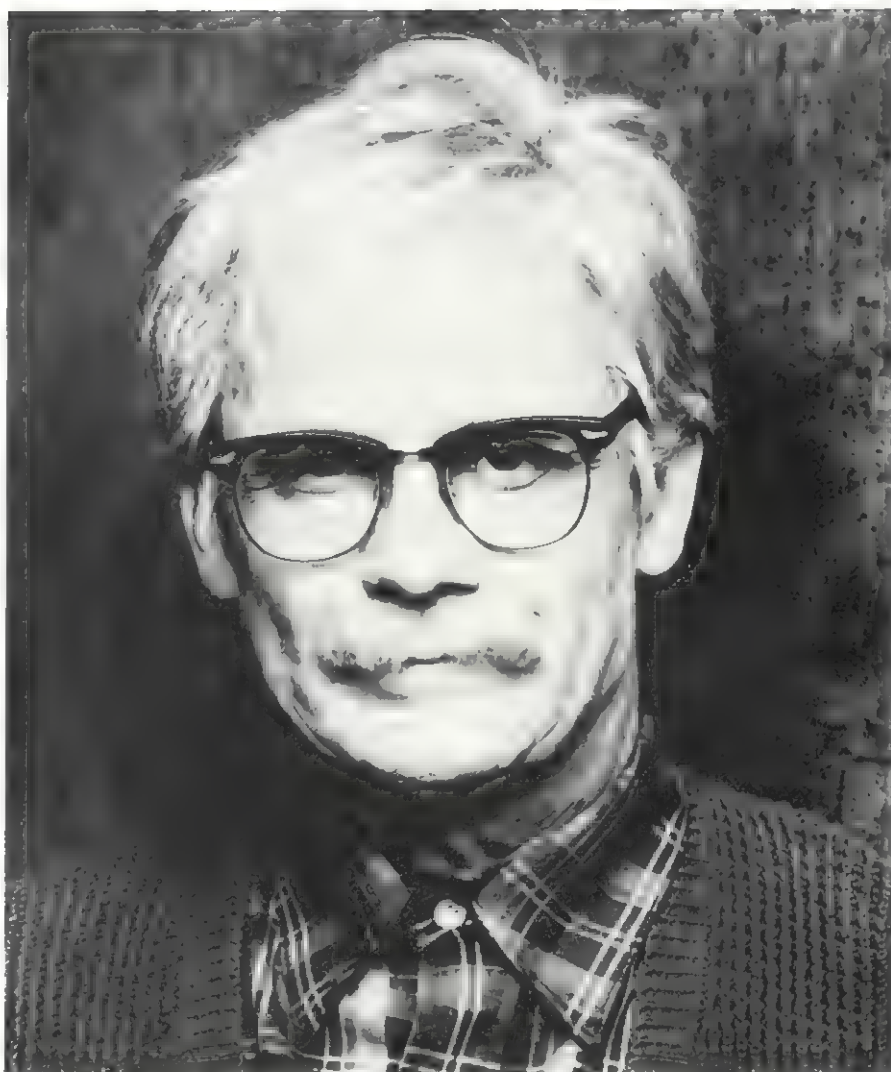
However at least **Stephen King's Golden Years** was designed for an adult audience, and had had some money spent on it, as well as intelligence and wit. In contrast, some areas of the country are getting **Hard Time on Planet Earth**, another American import, in which another sidekick specialist – Martin Kove, the musclebound sexist from *Cagney and Lacey* (and, incidentally, the leader of the Cobrai Kai dojo in *Karate Kid* where his star pupil was played by the actor who played Edward Woodward's son in *The Equalizer* – see how all this stuff fits together? Oh, all right, suit



yourself) – plays an alien. Not just any alien. No, a rampaging warrior alien who looks like Alien with a nose job and who is sentenced to live on Earth in the guise of a human until he has learned, er, stuff, or the ratings drop too low.

So we began with a straightforward steal of the landing scene from *Terminator* and then we moved on through the *E.T.* episode, the *Terminator* episode, the *Brother from Another Planet* episode and the just-about-any recentish sci-fi movie you care to name episode. The intelligence of the audience is not assumed to be high. We are not assumed to be capable of recognizing any of these references, nor of remembering the plot from one episode to another, and we are expected to find all the faux-naïf “tell me about the war of the sexes” stuff funny. I thought the States were going through a television science-fiction renaissance at the moment, with good, average and marginal stuff fighting it out for network time. Well, will someone please go over there and buy up the good stuff? Preferably someone who can recognize the good stuff when they fall over it, and who, when they step into something like *Hard Time on Planet Earth*, has the wit to wipe it off their shoe?

(Wendy Bradley)



Keith Szarabajka in 'Stephen King's Golden Years'

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# A Small Patch on My Contract

Jonathan Lethem

Suit didn't wake me until we were in orbit around Halfgone. As usual, he woke me with an orgasm. My consciousness swam out of stasis through a murk of erotic images, my nipples and clit humming as Suit peeled away to create a little airspace. Suit didn't make a window, but I didn't need one to know we weren't on ship any more. I gasped, drawing in my first unassisted breath, and, as the pleasure of orgasm passed, the discomfort of waking from stasis took over. My muscles ached, my throat was dry, and my head was filled with snot. I snorted, coughed it up, and let Suit deal with the mess. "Jesus, Suit..."

I tweaked my nipples to try and bring the pleasure back, but it was no go. "Shit." Why weren't we on ship? Where were we? "Something to drink," I croaked.

Suit extended a dripping tube and I sucked it. Soda water with lemon, my usual, only now I wanted something sweet. "Juice," I gabbled, water dribbling across my face. Suit extended a spongy tendril and cleaned me up, at the same time switching the water to guava nectar. When I was out of breath I bit the tube closed.

"Explain," I said. "But make me come again, too."

Suit dropped down around the curve of my stomach, and at the same time dropped a headset over my shoulders and began a little science lecture.

Remember about the Godballs? he wanted to know. "Yeah," I said. "Those lumps of flesh – they dream things, right? And they're endangered, there's only a few left."

They dream the universe, said Suit. Very important. Only anti-entropic force ever discovered. Source of all existence.

"Oh yeah," I said, and then Suit did something that made me add: "Mmmm."

We're going to protect one against an Assassin. Remember them?

"I guess I cut that class," I said sarcastically. I hate it when Suit gets patronizing.

Every Godball has an Assassin, eventually. That's why they're dwindling.

"Has an Assassin ever been stopped?"

Never.

I tried to fake a yawn, but then Suit made me come.

Ten minutes later Suit opened a window and I watched as we plummeted towards port. The research station looked like a single unburst blister on the ruined surface of Halfgone.

There were three men inside, according to Suit, and

they were the three remaining human beings on the planet.

Trouble started the moment we touched down. When the airlock sealed above us the lights in the port went out. Suit kept me sealed up, not trusting the air, and threw out a single beam from my forehead, like a miner's helmet. I located the station entrance and took a few steps towards it before a laser beam hissed out a foot ahead of me, about chest-high. Suit threw me to the ground and grew turrets, and his light went strobe. He would time his movements to coincide perfectly with the blackouts, and the enemy, whoever that was, would perceive me as a teleporting armoured tank.

In this case, I saw, I was fighting the three scientists I was supposed to be helping protect the Godball. Well, hardly fighting any more. Each armed, they were pressed up against the interior walls of the airlock, blinking in confusion at the strobe. "Don't kill them," I told Suit. "Give me a speaker out."

Suit dropped a mike over my mouth and I said: "Shoot again and you die." Suit boomed it out in a voice that must have rattled their eyeballs.

One of them yelled: "Tell us who you are."

"Clothes," I whispered to Suit. He shut off the light and shrank away the body armour, leaving me in a tight-fitting bodysuit with a weapons belt on my hip. The extra material became a luggage trunk on wheels at my side.

Once I was dressed Suit had me glow, very gently, all over, so they could see me. "Delia Limetree," I said. "Didn't you get a message?"

"I – we thought you were the Assassin," said the first one, the one who'd yelled. There was a dark patch of sweat under both arms of his jumpsuit. "We thought the message was a trick."

"Nope," I said. "You're luckier than that." I picked up the rest of Suit and nodded at the door, and the men stumbled after me wordlessly, fumbling at the locks on their weapons. I could see a panicky glaze of adrenalin in their eyes; these weren't ordinarily men of action.

"Desani and Sons owns the lease on my Suit," I explained. "I was shipping back from a bodyguarding stint at a corporate summit with the Mound Builders. But somebody thought I could do some good here, apparently, and requisitioned the lease. I launched offship about half an hour ago – only been awake for about fifteen minutes. Don't know how the hell I'm



getting back." I stopped at the door and let them lead me into the station.

It was pretty minimal. A science outfit with living quarters, two bathrooms and a communal kitchen. There were two labs and a storage shed with a freezer. Nowhere to run; these boys were rats in a box. Now I was too.

The rats introduced themselves. Oral Detbar, the one who'd spoken first, was fifty or so, his face gaunt behind old-fashioned glasses. He had the bodiless, limp handshake of a lifelong scientist. He'd been on Halfgone the longest. Mitchell Yp and Eddy Spanic were what was left of his staff.

All three of them looked sweaty, overtired, and jumpy with fear. More than I would have expected, even given the situation as Suit had laid it out. Maybe there was something I didn't know yet.

"So where's the Godball?" I said, trying to be jaunty.

Nobody took the cue. All three men looked at the floor. The fluorescent lights flickered and the generator hummed. The place had the feel of a tomb. They didn't even have a mothervoice playing.

"Yes," said Detbar. "The Godball. We have to talk to you about that."

"Okay," I said. "Whatever. Can I take a shower first. I'm just out of the Womb, y'know?"

They looked at me as if I'd proposed a group shower, Detbar grumbling up a cough, Spanic screwing up his features in distaste, Yp smiling weakly, intrigued but wondering if he'd heard wrong.

"Shower," I said. "Me. Bathroom. Be right back."

Detbar found his tongue, quickly showed me the extra bedroom. As I went inside I heard Yp and Spanic quietly arguing.

This was not a calm bunch.

**T**he room was a shambles, like the rest of the place. I dropped the luggage trunk of extra Suit-stuff on the floor, and stripped. As I dropped Suit on the bed his spinal matrix wriggled free and clung to my wrist; I opened my mouth and he ran up my arm, and in. Suit and I were never far apart. The bathroom had two doors, one leading to the opposite bedroom. I locked it and turned on the shower.

Right away I heard them rummaging in my room. I let them go at it. Suit's discarded material was inert and unrevealing without his spine. A minute later the door burst open. Detbar and Spanic, both holding guns on me. No sign of Yp.

"Out of the shower."

I stepped out.

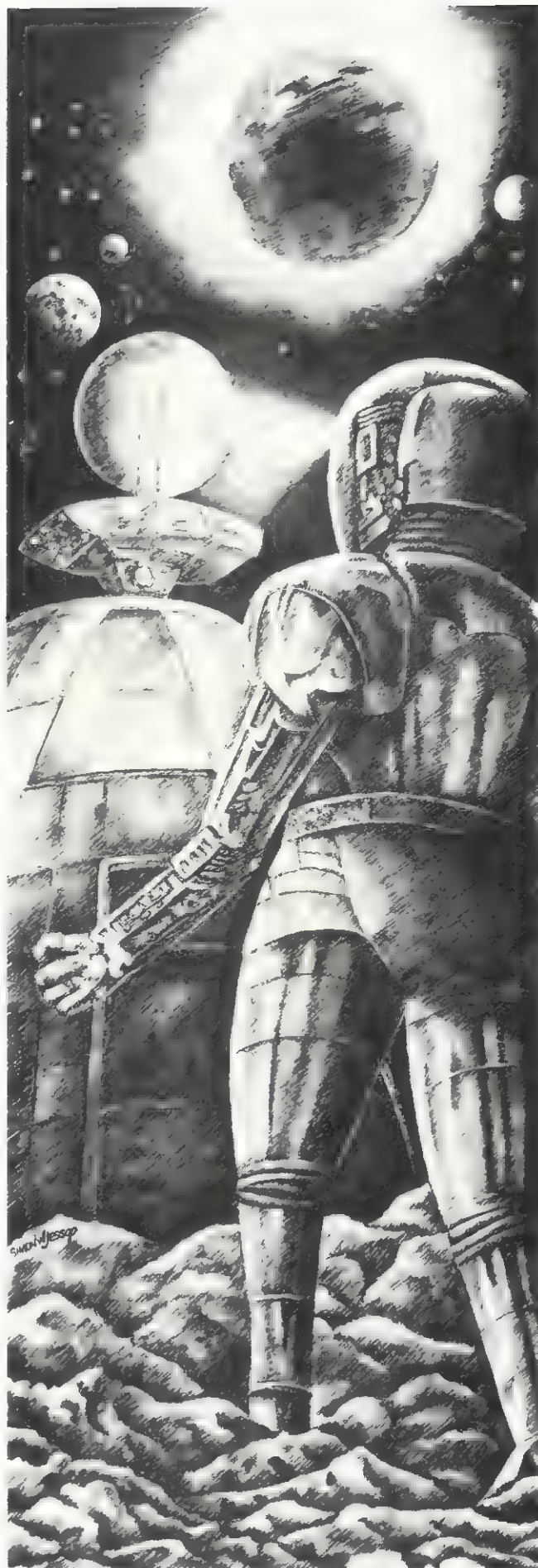
"We decided we can't trust you," said Spanic. "You might be concealing the Assassin. You might be the Assassin. We don't know what form it will take."

"I don't know what form it will take either," I said. "But it probably won't want a shower."

Spanic made an ugly face and raised his weapon to my head. "Shut up," he said. I decided he didn't like me.

Detbar began a halfhearted and clumsy search in two of the three places I could still have something hidden. I don't know how long it had been since the last woman left Halfgone, but what Detbar had forgotten could fill up an anatomy book.

When he stood up I kissed him. Suit harpooned his tongue, then climbed out of my mouth and draped



Illustrations by Simon Jessop



himself around my neck. Detbar howled, unable to close his mouth, his tongue spiked to my collar. I heard Spanic, beside me, click the safety on his gun; I turned and smashed his nose, then took his gun away. He stumbled back against the wall, his hands over his face.

Suit let go of Detbar's tongue, and Detbar fell away to the floor, blood leaking down his chin, wet breast-prints on the front of his jumpsuit.

"It's essential to be able to tell your friends from your enemies," I said. "You guys should be mixing me up a shaker of Bloody Marys right now, and I should be in the shower. There'll be plenty of time for hijinks, ambushes and the like when the Assassin shows up. Which, according to Suit, isn't for another hour or so. So relax. I mean, really." I raised Spanic's gun. "Where's Yp?"

Detbar wasn't talking, and I didn't blame him. Blood was seeping from between his lips. He straightened out his glasses and, hands cupping his chin, slipped back out of the tiny bathroom.

"Mitchell didn't want to help," said Spanic in a defeated voice. "He trusted you." Suddenly, inexplicably, he began weeping.

I hadn't hit him that hard. "What?" I said.

"I think he's in love with you," moaned Spanic.

I didn't know what to say to that, so I just stared. Spanic suddenly got control of himself, hurriedly rearranging his features and sniffing back his tears. He stepped up and plucked away his gun. "For God's sake," he said. "Put something on."

Then he turned and left the room.

I went into the bedroom, put Suit back on, and went out into the corridor. Nobody visible, but I heard water running. When I turned the corner I found Detbar washing out his mouth in a lab sink. He looked up at me fearfully.

"It'll heal. Get that bandaged and then let's have a powwow, okay?"

He nodded solemnly, and a stream of pink saliva rolled out of the corner of his mouth.

I went and found Yp and Spanic. They were in one of the ramshackle bedrooms, lying on the bed in each other's arms. "'Scuse me," I said.

"Eddy wants to say he's sorry," said Yp gravely, sitting up.

"Hey, no sweat. Meet me in the kitchen in a minute; we're gonna shoot the shit."

"Oh, we'll come now," said Yp, quickly disentangling himself from Spanic, who looked sulky.

The two men trotted after me to the kitchen. Detbar joined us a minute later. The three of them took positions as far from one another in the tiny space as they could manage, and nobody except Yp seemed willing to meet my eye.

"Okay," I said. "Where's that Godball?"

"We ateth ith," said Detbar, who had a length of cotton gauze wrapped around his tongue.

"Ate it," I repeated stupidly.

"Yes," giggled Spanic, suddenly giddy. "That's right. We fried it in butter and salt, uh, and we divided it in three parts and ate it. We didn't save you any, either."

There was a long silence. Spanic stood grinning at me. Yp cast his eyes down shyly, and Detbar went and started fumbling in the refrigerator. "Thomething to drink," he said, breaking the seal on a bottle of juice. "Yeth," he said, "when the methage came that an Athathin had been thenth – shit!" He spat the cotton wad onto the floor and took a gulp of juice. "God that stings!"

He turned to face me but still wouldn't meet my eye. "When the Godball heard the Assassin was coming, he suggested we eat him – the Godball, I mean. The Assassin is like a bee-sting, you know. It can only kill once, then it's used up. The Godball thought if he were dispersed between the three of us..." Detbar looked up and the light glared off his lenses. "He would live on. Survive the attack."

"But the Assassin will still come," said Spanic, his voice quavering with emotion. "It'll kill one of us. It has to. That's its, uh, *raison d'être*."

"We're beginning to dream for the Godball," said Detbar. "He was right, apparently. He is living on."

Spanic appeared suddenly offended, and rushed out of the room. Yp followed, with a guilty and helpless look back at me and Detbar.

"It's something like a powerful hallucinogen," said Detbar. "You'll have to forgive us. We're not at our best. I – " He began weeping.

"Okay, okay," I said. "Apologies, sorry about the tongue. You're not going to mess with me any more, are you?"

Detbar shook his head sorrowfully. "No, no. You're wonderful, best thing that's happened... Christ... gotta get hold of myself."

"You're sorry you ate the Godball?" I asked, curious. According to Suit it was one of the last seven. And Detbar had devoted his career to studying it, protecting it from extinction.

"I don't know." He sighed, lifted his glasses and rubbed at his eyes. "It begged us to, you know. It was so frightened of the Assassin. I was happy to release it from that."

"So cheer up."

"Things haven't been good since then. We've been running in circles. Eddy... fell in love with Yp. And ever since we ate the Godball, our fear of the Assassin has been intense."

"Is Spanic right? Will it want to kill one of you?"

"I don't know. It's sort of a death message, a signal sent out to cancel the dreaming – it will have to fulfil its mission somehow. We – can you help us?"

"That's the idea, babe."

"But listen – " He looked up, suddenly lucid and desperate. "Our lives mean nothing, in the long run. Do you understand? What's essential is that the Godball survive, in some form, and keep dreaming... that's what's important."

"Big deal, huh?"

"Weren't you – didn't you go to school?"

"I was raised to inhabit my suit," I said. "In symbiosis."

He sighed. "The Godballs are dying out. The fewer there are, the less of an inhabiting force there is to support the great, dead universe."

"Right, right," I said. "That's why all this terrible ruination everywhere, natch. But where did the Assassins come from?"

"No one knows."

"What happens if all the balls die?"

"Everything goes rote. Just a working out of likelihoods, after that. The Godballs are pumping out possibilities, twists in the tale. Without them, uh – 'terrible ruination, natch.' Very terrible. I don't know how to explain it to you, girl. Just take my word, that protecting... whatever's left of the Godball... is the most important assignment you'll ever accept."

He was weeping again.

I left him sitting there. Suit thought it was down to about half an hour now before the Assassin reached Halfgone, and he seemed very keyed-up, very excited by the prospect of battle. We walked through the little station, casing it out for defensive positions, memorizing the nooks and crannies, and we left little bits of Suit, with segments of his neural spine, sitting in a few odd places, just to give us an extra edge.

Would there be a fight? With no Godball to kill, would the Assassin amount to anything formidable?

I could only hope so.

When I passed through Yp's room I found the two men huddled together in bed again, and when I left for the airlock Yp followed after me, puppydoglike.

"What are you doing?" he said.

The airlock doors closed behind me. "Preparing maybe to save your butt, that's all."

"Eddy says you're not really human. He said you're just a prisoner of that suit of yours, just a sort of killing machine. A killing machine with tits, is what he said." Yp's tone was both petulant and challenging. He was baiting me. He was also tripping on the Godball, and I gave him some slack.

I looked at him and he smiled, and I smiled back. He had a nice face, and pretty well-formed body, for a lab rat. I leaned forward as though I was going to kiss him, figuring he heard of what happened to Detbar by now.

He jerked backwards, his smile gone.

"Get lost," I said, spitting. He walked backwards to the airlock door, mouthing the words "sorry," but not quite getting it out.

I finished checking out the airlock and went back into the station. Detbar was gone from the kitchen, so I went there to get some protein to refurbish Suit. All they had was awful canned vegetables and vacuum packed soy meat, but once Suit had stoked up I had him convert it for me into a nice chocolate malted, and I was sipping at it when Spanic slithered into the kitchen.

"I'm the one," he said, goggling his eyes.

"What?"

"I feel it," he said. "I think I ate more of the Godball than the others. The Assassin's going to pick me to kill."

"Yummy yummy," I said. "But how do you know the Assassin isn't going to find a way to kill you all?"

"No. I heard you planning it with Detbar. You're going to sacrifice me. It's perfect, isn't it. You want me out of the way." He began literally wringing his hands.

I stared at him, trying not to laugh.

"Look at you. What is that? Chocolate ice cream? Where'd you get that? What kind of a monster are you?"

"Boo," I said.

"It's true, isn't it? And when I'm gone, you and Mitchell will be together."

"You're jealous."

"He's in love with you, I can tell. And Detbar's going along with it. He never liked me –"

"Detbar's thinking about the Godball. And if Mitchell's in love with me he's as dreamed-out as you are. And he is. You're both out of your minds."

"He says you tried to kiss him."

I puckered my lips, and when he sneered I spouted a mouthful of sticky malted onto his shirt.

"Shit!" he said.

"Go ask Detbar if you want. There isn't any conspiracy. I'm here to save the Godball."

Spanic turned and left. I heard him go into Detbar's quarters and babble out his accusations.

I followed, and Spanic, who'd been standing in the doorway, bolted into the room. Detbar was sitting on the edge of the bed, his head in his hands, his glasses to one side of the bed. "Ms Limetree?" he said.

"None other."

He seemed barely able to put together a sentence, the words dredged up from some bottomless mire. "Eddy... says that you're... interfering between him... and Mr Yp."

"I have to be honest," I said. "Even if you don't count stasis, I haven't been fucked in a while, and Yp is the only one around here who seems like he might be up to it. But, I dunno, Mr Yp is a grown-up adult and all, and I figure it's his business, y'know?"

Spanic glared at me, his pupils huge. Detbar put on his glasses and blinked at me gravely.

"I... Ms Limetree..." said Detbar, "I'm going to come clean about something... I've been sitting here for the longest time... trying to figure out whether you're one of my successes or one of my failures... obviously, I'm taking a great risk telling you this... you're certainly one of my creations, like Mr Spanic and Mr Yp, but it's just that I can't recall dreaming you and so I don't know what I... intended in your case. I mean, you're essentially quite friendly... but you're far more wilful than the others..."

It was beginning to look as if I'd lost Detbar.

"Perhaps you're some kind of composite," he went on. "A creation of my good side that was subsequently altered, corrupted by my self-destructive impulses... or the reverse; perhaps I've salvaged you from the entropic portions of my mind... perhaps I'm in the process of doing that now, by telling you this, for example..."

Suddenly Suit screamed at me. The bit of him I'd left in the airlock.

The Assassin had arrived on Halfgone.

I turned from the doorway in time to see it float through the airlock door and into the corridor. A dark sphere, striped with irregular veins, and bulging fleshily between them. It passed smoothly through the steel door, as though it were made of condensed black air, a malevolent projection rather than something tangible.

I slammed the door to Detbar's quarters shut, closing the two men inside, and Suit sealed up around me and readied himself for battle. He summoned his wayward spine joints and they came quietly creeping



through the station, to surround the Assassin on all sides.

The Assassin just hovered there, in midair, a shimmering black spot. As though it were thinking. It must have detected the Godball's absence by now. It had probably also sniffed out the dreaming traces that remained, in the three scientists.

Yp, hearing the door slam, rushed out into the hallway behind me. He stopped and stared at the Assassin, his mouth open.

"It's the same," he said.

"What?" I asked, without turning.

"The shape. It's the same as the Godball. Like its ghost or something."

"Get out of here," I said. "Lock yourself in."

"What are you going to do?"

"I don't know," I hissed. "Out."

He slipped back into his room.

The Assassin sat, frozen in midair. Suit's remote units flew up into the air and whirled around it, trying to draw fire, trying to elicit a response. The Assassin showed none. Suit flew his spine joints into the blackness of the sphere, where they were held, for a moment, out of sight.

When they emerged they seemed slowed.

"What?" I said to Suit, nervously.

Suit flew the remotes back and reformed his spine. He wanted it complete for the confrontation, apparently. I couldn't help wondering if he'd learned something that he wasn't telling me.

Then the Assassin began advancing steadily through the air towards us, as though Suit had agreed to some formal duel. "Shit," I said aloud. "Suit? Where are you?"

Suit didn't make any move that I could detect. If he was readying a defence it didn't involve me. The Assassin drifted forward until it touched Suit at my chest, and then continued, sinking into Suit and disappearing.

"Suit!"

Nothing. Suit's only move was to mop the sweat that trickled down my ribs. I waited to feel some sign of Suit's adjustment, but for all I could tell he was inert.

Had he conquered the Assassin so effortlessly that it didn't require my help?

Apparently. Or else the Assassin hadn't had all that much to begin with. The disappearance of the Godball had robbed it of its purpose.

I staggered backwards a step, still wary, waiting for some kind of shock or backlash, but there wasn't any. Suit retracted my helmet, always a sign of confidence, and otherwise hung on me like a nice-fitting set of clothes, his weapons capacity nil.

Well, okay then. If Suit was relaxed why shouldn't I be?

"What's happening?" cried a voice from behind the door at my left. Spanic.

"Uh, it's over," I said. "Everything's hunky dory."

"You're lying," said Spanic. "It's going to kill me."

The passing of the Assassin didn't necessarily mean calm on Halfgone.

"Uh, no, actually," I said. I was getting tired of Spanic. "It wasn't a big deal. The Godball was right to want to be eaten, I guess. The Assassin seemed pretty lightweight after all that buildup, truth be told."

"It's safe?"

"It's safe."

The door opened and Spanic stuck his head out. I spread my arms to indicate the empty corridor. "You missed it," I said. "Yp said it was a dead ringer for the Godball."

Spanic opened the door. I could see Detbar sitting on the bed behind him, his head still in his hands. Probably still trying to work out the reason he'd dreamed me into existence. Spanic stepped out and examined the corridor.

My hand jerked up against my will. Suit. He flowed down around my wrist, before I had time to think, and formed a simple handheld laser. I felt the trigger twitch under my finger, without my help. The middle of Spanic's body was fried into a bloody, burning mass, his hands waving momentarily in the air, his eyes wide. Then he folded into a heap on the floor.

The Assassin had overridden Suit.

**W**e strode forward, against my efforts, into the room where Detbar now huddled, terrified, in the furthest corner. He'd left his glasses on the bed, and he squinted up at me in uncomprehending fear. My arm trembled upwards with the laser, Suit straining against my muscles as I tried to point it away. "Suit!" I screamed. Then I bashed my free hand against my face, hard enough that my nose crackled. Not Suit's doing, but mine: if I was a danger to myself I'd distract him from killing Detbar. I needed time, to convince Suit of the importance of keeping the remaining traces of the Godball alive, and to figure out some way to purge the Assassin.

It worked, at least for a moment. Suit stopped. I got in another good blow to my own face, and felt blood roll out of my nose, then Suit threw up a helmet. So I exhaled everything in my lungs and held my breath. Not exactly a suicide attempt, but it would alarm Suit, who was always keeping track of my vital functions.

The part of Suit that was working for the Assassin slackened just enough that the part that was still mine asserted itself, and lowered the gun. I had something to work with. I hauled us clumsily back out into the corridor, leaving Detbar to cower alone.

"Listen," I said. Suit dropped a speaker into my ear and a subvoc mike down my throat and we talked.

Suit and I, we hadn't been at odds very often before. When we were, it didn't last long. We worked it out. We had to. We were married, you know. Compromise is the essence of conjugal tranquillity. That's what they told us in Suit school, anyway.

Suit made it very clear that he'd taken on the Assassin's priorities: he had to kill these men. Besides, it would please him to kill them. He'd been disappointed when a fight didn't materialize. What's more, he and the Assassin got along, on a fundamental level; they shared a distrust of this sloppy, vulnerable dream-stuff.

Who was I to stand in the way? It was a fair question.

For my part I let him know what I felt was important. It was pretty simple, once our cards were on the table. We struck a simple deal. Suit could kill them. But not before I got to fuck Yp.

Actually, I kept one card in my sleeve. Just a hunch, but if the Godball were intent on saving itself, I might

still be able to give it a chance. A long chance, but a chance nonetheless.

What I had in mind was a very un-Suitlike solution.

The prospect of betraying Suit, mixed with the thought of sex, made me feel all queasy inside. Putting it out of my head for the moment, I turned the corner back into the room, found Detbar, and raised my hand. This time I pulled the trigger. No point in missing out on everything.

Then Suit cleaned up my bloody face and shrank down to a skimpy set of frilled underwear, leaving another pile of extra baggage there in the hallway.

I found Yp in his room, sitting back calmly in his chair, a dim smile on his face. When I looked closer I saw that his eyeballs were rolled back so only white was visible. Dreaming, I guessed. I nudged his shoulder.

"Hello," he said woozily, his eyes rolling back into place. "What happened?"

Suit had my breasts propped up and my nipples stiff under the lace. I smiled at Yp long enough for him to mostly forget his question. "Oh, nothing, much," I said vaguely. "Everyone went to sleep."

"Really? I think I might have gone to sleep too. I had the most remarkable dream..."

The Godball had affected each of these men differently. Detbar had been gloomy and philosophical, Spanic shrill and paranoid, and Yp, it seemed, was growing ever more saintly and benign. I'd saved the right one for last. I plopped myself onto his lap and said: "Tell me about it."

His eyes widened. "Uh, gosh." He draped his arms tentatively around my waist. "Do you think it's possible for something you dreamed...to come true? I mean, because you dreamed it?"

I nibbled on his chin. "A good thing?"

"Uh, yeah," he said. "At least it seems that way."

"Did you dream about me?" I asked, squirming in his lap.

"Well, yes."

"Of course it's possible," I said. "In fact, that's exactly what happened to the Godball, only in reverse. Something bad came true."

"What do you mean?"

"I figured out the mystery of the Assassin. It was just the worst dream the Ball ever had; a thing that hated dreams, and hated the Godball, and was coming to destroy it. The unhappiest, most screwed-up part of the Godball dreamed it. It hated what it had dreamed so much that it wished it far, far way, galaxies away, but it couldn't wish it out of existence completely. So even though it took a long time to arrive, the Assassin was on its way."

"How do you know?"

"Suit talked to the Assassin," I said. "He learned all about it."

"What a horrible thought," he said. "That the most creative thing in the universe..."

I didn't want him troubled. "Forget it," I said. "Everything came out okay." I kissed him on the cheek, and Suit sent up a mist of pheromones.

"Yes," he said. "That's true. My...my dream came true too. You, I mean."

"Right." I pushed him off the chair and towards the bed.

"Oh, wow," he said. "Are we - ?"





I tore off his clothes. He wasn't going to need them after this anyway. Suit I lifted away and hung on the chair, except for his spine, which discreetly climbed up my ass. Like I said, Suit is never very far away.

And then I fucked Yp's brains out.

And then I strangled him to death.

Afterwards I took a nap, and when I woke up Suit made me a big meal and sent out a signal to Desani and Sons requesting a rescue drop to the station.

They said they'd be about 38 hours. I set up in Spanic's room – the one without a rotting corpse in it – and watched videos. After a while I began to dream, in the Godball sense, that is. I didn't mind. I was pretty sure I would handle it better than the scientists had.

Yes, the Godball was alive in my body. Had entered via Yp's emission, during orgasm. Just as I'd hoped – and feared, of course. Deceiving Suit wasn't a simple thing for me. And housing the Godball probably wouldn't be simple either. But the Godball was hungry for life, and he hadn't missed his chance. That was the idea, right? To preserve the essence of the Godball, to keep the dream alive. If I could accomplish that, the men didn't really matter. Suit deserved his killing.

He'd been tricked, of course. He thought I only wanted to fuck. Typical of Suit's one-track mind: sex and death, sex and death... but there wasn't anything he could do about it. Suit could no more kill me than I could shed him. We needed each other. And if he got to take on the Assassin, why couldn't I carry the Godball? It was only fair.

I figured that with my capabilities I was a much better host for the Godball, anyway. My survival gradient was much higher. I was his ticket off the station, his ticket to the stars. Plus I had the Assassin right here with me, in Suit, where I could keep an eye on it.

It was going to be very interesting, living with the three of them.

Just before the dropship landed Suit gave me some news: something else was alive in my body. A little bit of Yp had met up with a little bit of me. I was hatching a baby. And yes, the Godball was in the little bit of something that would become the baby, too.

Hands off! I warned Suit.

Suit agreed. Then he asked if it would be okay if he knit it some swaddling clothes.

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**Jonathan Lethem** wrote "The Speckless Cathedral" (Interzone 57). His first novel has now been accepted for publication and will appear in the USA from Harcourt, Brace in the Spring of 1994. He lives in Berkeley, California.

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# Opening Pandora's Box

Stan Nicholls talks to Louise Cooper

Louise Cooper disagrees with the received wisdom that fantasy is a particularly difficult genre to tackle. "In some ways it's the easiest thing to write," she says. "For a start, no one can turn around and accuse you of inaccuracy, because you've created the world and you've dictated the rules, which wipes out all the problems of research at one stroke."

"I think also, and I'm sure virtually all fantasy writers do this, you draw parallels with the real world. There's so much material at your disposal in that sense; certain social set-ups, political in-fightings, characters and situations. A little observation of human nature and the way it's inclined to work opens up the door to a wealth of material for a fantasy writer."

Creating a fantasy world, she adds, is a bit like trying to imagine the component parts of a village or small town. "It sounds quite crazy, but if you trawl through a local newspaper you've almost got a microcosm of an entire world in there. It's strange, but fantasy just seems to come as easily to me as that. Perhaps it's horribly inconsistent, I don't know. I've had one or two letters from readers saying, 'Hey, in this book you said so and so, but in the next book you contradicted yourself.' Fortunately they're very small things usually; the words of a ritual or something like that."

"I try to be internally consistent about the magical systems in my books. That's the side of fantasy which interests me. I'm not interested in the swords, I'm interested in the sorcery. Because I think there's so much scope in there; it falls back on so many mythologies from all over the world, ancient legends and one thing and another. That's the area which always intrigued me."

"I read people like Aleister Crowley many years ago, and I found it fascinating, but I don't think the writings of Cabalists like Crowley and McGregor Mathers have much connection with fantasy at all. Fantasy is much more the stuff of legend and fairytale in my opinion. It's almost the Brothers Grimm for adults."

Fairy tales, legends and mythology were the subjects that absorbed her in childhood. "I was also reading things like C.S. Lewis' Narnia books," she remembers, "and Barbara Sleigh's *Carbonel* and *The Kingdom of Carbonel*. Consequently, as soon as I could write I started scribbling stories – that was when I was about six or seven, I think – and the stories I wrote were always ghost stories or fairy stories. My interest in that sort of fiction has never died."

"I absolutely hated school and left when I was 15. I didn't want to get any academic qualifications, to my parents' horror, but I raised hell until they let me leave. Then I had a succession of jobs, which I loathed on the whole, but at least they enabled me to teach myself typing and speedwriting."

"I'd started trying to write books when I was 13 or 14. They were the dreadfully self-indulgent kind of stuff written by early teenagers; stories about pop stars and things like that. Then, when I got to 16 or 17, I read (Michael Moorcock's) *Stormbringer*, and that drilled a hole straight through my cerebral cortex."

This, and other examples of fantasy literature she began to discover at that time, sparked her into writing her own. "The first fantasy novel I wrote was *Lord of No Time*, which was what the Time Master trilogy eventually came out of. But the first novel I

had published was *The Book of Paradox*, in 1973. That was a fantasy novel based on the major arcana of the Tarot. It flopped miserably, sad to say, but I like to tell myself that was partly because fantasy was very much in the doldrums at the time. There had been a brief flurry with Moorcock and so on in the early 70s and then it went into one of its dips before starting to come back again. And me, with perfect timing, managed to get smack at the bottom end of it. Anyway, *The Book of Paradox* and *Lord of No Time* were published, and then there was a long gap in which I was doing all sort of other things."

Moorcock was a stylistic influence at the start. "He's a very underrated writer. I think the finest book he's done is *Gloriana*, and it was important to the field because it was a more serious kind of fantasy, compared to the straightforward sword and sorcery that was so prevalent then. I thought it was absolutely brilliant. His style's very different there, too."

"I suppose you can say fantasy as we know it now was started off by Lord Dunsany and other turn-of-the-century writers. But they set a style that didn't seem to change a great deal for many years. Tolkien in a sense followed the same path, and so did Moorcock in his early books. The style was slightly medievalized, for want of a better word. That's something I'm trying to get away from, but without becoming so parochial that it rings a discord, so to speak."

Does she regard Tolkien as any kind of influence? "No. We all owe a terrific debt of gratitude to Tolkien, because he made fantasy respectable and popular, but personally I just can't get on with his books. *Lord of the Rings* doesn't move me as it should, let's say. A





Louise Cooper

large chunk of fantasy generally, these days, doesn't move me either, particularly the more twee stuff. A lot of it is terribly beautiful and soothing, but I find that sort of thing rather soft, a little too genteel. I like something with an edge to it."

**I**n the 70s, Cooper worked as a secretary, copy writer and blurb writer for publishers New English Library and, later, Sphere. "During this period I wrote a couple of horror novels and some supernatural romances. Sappy stories, basically! I was also doing freelance copy-editing and so forth to keep the wolf from the door.

"I was very lucky, because working in publishing they quite often wanted somebody to do commissions, and I was well placed to land them. They'd pay £150 or £300 or something like that, and I did quite a few under pseudonyms. That was good training. Working to a tight deadline and within very specific format was good discipline.

"The recession's hit publishing very badly now, of course, and there doesn't seem to be quite as

much bandwagon publishing of that kind as there was up to a few years ago. One or two authors would write a book that really hit the jackpot, and all the publishers would come along and say, 'Right, we want a dozen books like that this year; let's find the people to write them.' I think that's gone. Add to that the demise of the mid-list and it looks depressing, a bit disheartening. It's sad for anyone who's trying to start now."

Eventually she found an agent who encouraged her to concentrate on fantasy. "She read *Lord of No Time* and suggested I turn it into a trilogy. She told me there was nothing particularly underhand about doing that because it would be a totally different project. So I did, and she sold it to the States on a synopsis and sample chapter."

Her brand of fantasy is concerned with character and plot; she is less interested in the surrounding paraphernalia. So there is a limit to the amount of research undertaken. "Except in terms of something like a ship, say. I may want to know what the difference between the main mast and the

mizzenmast is. Or how you rig a foresail. You've got to get those sort of details right. Weapons are another example. But I have to admit that if one of my characters gets into a sword or knife fight I make the details hazy enough not to give away my complete lack of knowledge!

"What interests me more is what's going on in people's minds. Stories where a great amount of detail is to the fore don't appeal to me, although I know that kind of thing does interest a lot of people. There are fantasy readers who love fine detail, hence all the wargaming, model-making and so on. That sort of activity can be superb; I really admire the skill and insight displayed by these people, but I think I'm probably too lazy to get into that to any extent.

"Talking of the kind of fannish side of things, there's a young man from Liverpool who, completely out of the blue, recently sent me a role-player's guide to the world of *Time Master*. I was absolutely astounded. It was a terrific compliment. It's about 30,000 words long and beautifully done. He asked my

permission to publish it privately and sell it on the gaming circuit. We're working together now on a full-scale guide, but quite what we're going to do with it, I don't know! It's probably not the sort of thing my publishers over here or in the States would view as a commercial proposition. It's not big enough for that. But on a privately published level it might have some potential."

**A** lot of Cooper's work is in series. Is that for pragmatic commercial reasons or a need to fully explore her concepts? "It's a bit of both, to be honest. *Indigo* (the series published in the UK by Grafton) was originally conceived as open-ended and I didn't know how many books it might or might not turn into. When I put the idea to my American publisher, which was Tor at that time, my editor there said, 'What we would really like is eight books running parallel to the seven deadly sins, plus one introductory volume.' So it was in that sense fashioned by commercial considerations. But the other stuff, the *Time Master* series for example, just seemed naturally to extend over a number of volumes. The length of the stories I map out in my head often fall naturally into at least trilogies.

"As a matter of fact *Indigo* hasn't turned out the way it was originally intended. The seven deadly sins got lost somewhere along the way and it's turned into seven stages of an initiation journey. It does still parallel the seven deadly sins, but very vaguely, very thinly. Actually, I hope that everyone who reads it is going to be able to interpret it in their own way.

"*Indigo* grew out of an idea for a totally different series, which never came to anything, about a city that was in some senses alive. It was a city that had a kind of gestalt, a personality of its own. I came up with three or four different stories set there, and *Indigo* was a character in one of those stories. The series fell by the wayside, but the character – and her name, which I liked – stuck in my mind. Her personality started to come out very strongly.

"I think it was the Pandora's box legend that gave me the key to *Indigo*'s character. Then I thought some sort of witchcraft-type powers

would be appropriate; giving her the ability to change shape perhaps. That turned out to be a temporary thing and she's moved beyond that now. Then I had the idea of an animal companion, a wolf, with which she can communicate as she would with another human being. That really, really appealed to me.

"Then, as often happens, after a couple of books the ideas and characters started to develop a momentum of their own and went off in their own directions. I followed. This happens a lot with me. The story takes off and I go toddling happily along after it carrying my word processor. Mind you, I can get hopping mad with *Indigo* at times because she's so stubborn. And she never learns."

**I**t can take Cooper anything between three and ten months to finish a novel, occasionally a year. "I don't get what's commonly known as writer's block," she explains, "but I do get stuck on plot sometimes. One of my favourite quotes, and I ought to have it pinned up over my computer, is from Dr Johnson, who said, 'A man can write at any time if he would but set himself to it.'"

"But, having said that, sometimes it's really hard. This is something I've never been able to explain or understand, but there are times when I know exactly what I want to say and just cannot get the words into the right order. A sentence gets convoluted and rambling and the paragraphs are all wrong. So you have to keep on and on and on until you finally get it right. Every time I start a book I have a clear picture in my head of what it's going to be, then when it's finished it's a case of, 'Good God! I didn't think it would turn out like that!' I hope it's better than the original vision, of course, but who's to say?"

She describes herself as "slapdash and haphazard" in the way she works. "One of the few concessions I make to being organized is that I usually have an outline, some kind of synopsis before the book is written, but that always gets changed as I go along. In this respect the greatest discovery I ever made was the word processor, because of all the time it saves in cutting and pasting the alterations,

which is absolutely invaluable. I think I write a lot better as the result of using a word processor. Back in the neolithic age, when we all used typewriters, sometimes you thought, 'Oh no, I'm not going to do another draft.'

"I usually revise once. I subscribe to the Middle Eastern adage 'Consider it drunk, then consider it sober. If it's all right both ways, leave it.' So it's usually one draft and one revision with me. I do everything on screen then print out the draft in rough so I can have a look through it on the printed page. That gives you a totally different perspective than the screen. I hand edit, make those changes on the screen, and print it out again.

"I would certainly not want to give the impression that there's any kind of mediumistic aspect involved, but I do think a lot of it does come straight from the subconscious and bypasses the conscious. I often look back and think, 'Cor, did I do that?' And when I'm actually writing, and it's going really well, I can't stop for anything. I could be starving hungry or something but I still can't leave it. That's weird, but it's lovely.

"Another thing is that I'm a very visual writer. I find I can't write a scene until I've seen it running through my mind's eye like a film. This makes me think I'd love to do something like a screenplay. Something else I'd like to try is radio plays. The medium of radio is wonderful as far as I'm concerned."

**T**here are other directions she would like to travel in too. "If I didn't have to worry about making a living I'd probably experiment with other things. There are quite a few things I'd like to write that might not sell but I'd enjoy doing. But the point is that writing is an enormous pleasure for me and I don't think I could ever stop. If I never sold another book again as long as I live and suddenly became the ultimate pariah of the publishing industry I'd still write.

"The horror genre interests me, but not the stalk-and-slash stuff. I like to have my spine tingled but keep my lunch. I believe there's an as yet untapped well of ideas and inspiration out there for genuinely scary books. Supernatural might



be the wrong term for it; I'm thinking of something that hits at an atavistic level and is really fascinating and terrifying. I've got a few ideas in mind, but until the present series are finished I'm trying very hard not to think too seriously about them.

"I've done one children's book (*The Thorn Key*), and I'd like to do more. Children are much more willing to suspend their disbelief. Maybe I'll get into writing what you might call pleasantly scary books for children. I used to love being scared as a kid, providing it didn't scare me too much. When you try to write that kind of thing you have to know where to draw the line.

"I have to admit I'm not very experienced with children, having none of my own. They're almost like an alien species to me. But I followed two rules with my children's book. First, I made sure the story moved at a cracking pace and had plenty of action. Second, I learned not to change my writing style to what you think is going to be more suitable for children. That's patronising."

If she does write another children's book, will it be fantasy. "Yes. The only difference is that it would be set in the real world instead of an imagined one. It would be set in the 20th century and have a background of reality. I suppose because that's the sort of thing that fascinated me most when I was a child. I loved imagining that, like Narnia, there was a door in the back of the wardrobe leading to another place. I guess what I want to do is something like M.R. James for children."

She doesn't particularly want to write a mainstream novel. "Not really, no; and I don't want to write any more romances. That's partly because there's plenty of scope for romance in fantasy already. In fact, and there's nothing sexist about this, I think there's a certain amount of crossover between the fantasy and romance genres. A lot of female readers in particular equally enjoy both.

"Pure science fiction, although it is related to fantasy in some respects, is a very specialized field and I'm not sure I'd have the courage to try it. It seems to me you're born with the kind of knowledge you need to write it. It's very hard

to acquire. Any science fiction I'd try to write would come out like a 1950s pulp paperback of the worst kind. It would be terribly stilted and self-conscious. It just wouldn't work. I'm overawed by the technicalities of the genre, if you like, in terms of trying to imagine futuristic worlds that are believable and could conceivably come about. That's perhaps the get-out with fantasy; it can't happen, so you invent your own rules. But with science fiction there are certain rules, the rules of physics if nothing else, that have to be followed."

**T**here is another project she has had going for some time. "I've been collaborating with my husband, Gary, who's a journalist, on an historical blockbuster about the creation of the Great Western Railway, which interests us both a great deal. It's a family saga spanning about a hundred years. The subject's big enough that it might even be a four-part series.

"We've been having a lovely time with that, but we've put it aside for the time being because I don't know whether it would be commercial. And to be honest we came across a few technical problems, in terms of making the story exciting enough to match the history, which wasn't actually as exciting as popular legend might have it. The fact is that once the railway was built all it really did was run for a hundred years until it was nationalized in the 1940s!

"I've found collaborating astonishingly easy, which is perhaps to be expected when you're working with your partner. I've heard good stories and horror stories from many people about collaborations, but our stuff has seemed naturally to gel very well together. We tend to agree on most things, which is lucky. It's an interesting change from fantasy as well, because the real world is much better documented, obviously, and you have to bring a different kind of discipline to it."

But, whatever other areas she may wander into, Louise Cooper intends to keep on with fantasy. No other genre, she contends, can match its potential for imagination. "I start with the belief that if the universe is infinite then all

things are possible. In fact, if it is infinite, all things must exist. That's part of the reason why, in a lot of the stuff I do, I invent completely imaginary worlds which have no name and no location. Because to give them a name and a location immediately restricts them. What I like to do is bring my imagination to bear on the world and set it in my own context. I want the readers to do that too, so I like to leave the context wide open, not make it somewhere specific, six parsecs off Alpha Centauri, an alternate Earth or something. Defining it too much can be a bit disappointing for the reader.

"When you've really enjoyed a book you want to sit down and add your own dimensions to it. Knowing everything precludes that. I don't want to know everything about my worlds myself. I want there to be some surprises left for me as well."

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*A collection of Stan Nicholls' interviews with science-fiction and fantasy writers will appear this autumn from Little, Brown.*

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# The Way Into the Wendy House

Barrington J. Bayley

**F**orget about Ludlow, and Clun, and Bridgnorth, and those other pretty townships of south Shropshire. Drive aimlessly round the Wrekin, a hill just short of being a mountain, through Eaton Constantine as though going nowhere, and Little Wenlock, until you come to Wrockwardine Wood, and finally to Donnington Wood. Go down the slope from St Matthew's Church, past the old disused Victorian school building, and at the bottom a rough track leads off the road, revealing two Duke of Sutherland cottages. At its end, screened by beech trees so that the lighted sign and windows show only at a certain angle, you will find the Bell Inn. Now you have come to the vacant centre of the world, through which all human beings pass at some time, though they are rarely noticed.

The Bell Inn itself is at least two centuries old, and at one time was a real inn, with its own coach house. Fifty years ago its clientele would have consisted of the tenants of the since-demolished coal-miners' terrace and a scattering of farm labourers. Since then the area has become better populated and its fortunes have been chequered: at most times a rural rough-house, sometimes nearly deserted, now and then reviving to become convivial and well-frequented, under a succession of landlords.

Mention should be made of the ghosts which nearly all resident landlords and landladies claim to have seen. Most frequently reported is a tall man in a three-cornered hat, glimpsed standing at the end of the bar or wandering about in the living quarters upstairs.

When I first took to frequenting the Bell, I spoke to no one. I regarded myself as superior to the Donnington folk, none of whom were science-fiction fans. Instead I used my pub time as my reading time, sitting at a table conveniently close to the bar and immersing myself in science-fiction novels borrowed from the local library while swallowing a few pints of Tetley's bitter. On the whole people would leave me in peace. It was vaguely annoying, therefore, when the young man I later came to know as Alan began to approach me with a shy grin, asking if what I was reading was a good book. He had read some science fiction, he said, and mentioned one or two of the more commonly known authors. I responded politely but distantly, not wanting to encourage him. He might well have read some science fiction, but that did not make him a fan. A true fan is soon recognizable by another of his kind (rather as homosexuals are said to be able

to recognize one another) and I could see that he was not one. Probably he was a little more intelligent than the general run of locals, but that was to say nothing at all.

**O**ne evening I entered the lounge of the Bell to be assailed by an overpowering din. The landlord had hired an entertainer. I was hovering in displeased manner near the door when Alan (whose name I did not as yet know) raised his glass in greeting from where he was sitting near by, and managed to make himself understood over the racket created by an amplified guitar, drum machine, and a yowling rendition of *The Crystal Chandelier*. "Shall we go into the bar where it's quieter?"

I nodded, resigning myself to the fact that he had succeeded in negotiating the transition from near-stranger to drinking acquaintance. To tell the truth the bar of the Bell is a more pleasant place than the lounge, if one can leave aside the roughness of its habitués. It is in the oldest part of the building. Broad, patient oak beams support the low ceiling. In winter a wood fire casts a warm glow. I bought myself a pint from one of the hand-pulled pumps and stood in silence, gazing at the counter, not wishing to be the one to initiate a conversation. Alan's opening gambit came as a surprise.

"Did you hear that talk on philosophy on Radio Three last Wednesday evening?"

Slowly I lifted my head and focused my gaze on a blank spot on the wall. It is hard to describe the feeling of disorientation which came over me at that moment. Having been so long confirmed in the conviction that the Donnington people are all morons, their mental horizons never extending beyond the activities of stealing, fighting one another, and the botched repair of unroadworthy cars, it seemed entirely incongruous to be hearing what Alan had just said. Recovering my sense of reality, I told myself that he had probably heard some fragment of the talk accidentally while fiddling with the radio dial, and now thought to "butter me up" by referring to it.

"Yes," I answered. Loftily, still somewhat adrift in my mind, I went on to explain that the subject of the talk, which as it happened I had listened to closely, was one of the oldest questions in all philosophy. Stated in different terms, it had exercised the ancient Greeks: whether gross materiality is the fundamental stuff of existence, or some other principle. Pausing,



I decided to assert my superior knowledge once and for all. "Have you read a book by a Roman writer called Lucretius? *On the Nature of the Universe*? It presents the materialist view —"

"Yes," he told me readily. "I've read it in the original Latin."

"What?"

"I have a degree in classics. I read Latin and ancient Greek."

I have never dared ask him if my face mirrored my astonishment. To learn that standing beside me in the bar of the Bell, resort of blockheads, was someone proficient in ancient languages, was like discovering that the building had suddenly been transported to the surface of the moon. When, after a moment, I recovered my voice, I sputtered indignantly.

"But why didn't you tell me?"

He was amused. "You mean you only want to talk to me because I have a classics degree?"

"Well, of course."

From them on it was I who became the importuner. Night after night I attempted to engage him in conversation about whatever scientific or metaphysical topic had engaged my attention at the time. It was not long before he became exasperated. Bluntly he informed me that he did not come to the pub for intellectual stimulation. He only wanted to talk to dullards, about nothing at all.

What else would a ghost do? And how else could I describe Alan as I came to know him? The vagueness which infects the academic mind had with him taken quite the wrong direction; his oddness was of a sort which the people around him did not even have the intelligence to notice. With his cleverness, his great erudition, why had he not gone on to gain a doctorate, and then to enjoy the rich rewards of an academic career? One could imagine him in a well-paid post in some American university. Instead he had returned to Donnington and had remained there, with no apparent interest in following any particular occupation. Steeped in the ideals of classical civilization, he possibly thought it unbecoming to strain after position or material comforts; he once confessed to a hankering after the life of a mediaeval monk, poring over the surviving fragments of the libraries of the ancients. As it was he lived a hermit-like existence in a small flat, surrounded by books and guitar scores (he was also an accomplished amateur musician). He never read a newspaper, and was one of those rare eccentrics of the modern world who do not possess, or wish to possess, a television set. He was a sort of faded lost manuscript, a palimpsest, an invisible bubble of learning in a loud and boorish community, which he did not seem to despise as much as he should.

It would have been about a year later, I think, that I came into the lounge early one evening to find him the only other customer. I approached cautiously, aware by now that my presence sometimes annoyed him. While serving me the landlord mentioned having seen the apparition in the three-cornered hat earlier in the day. "Saw him out of the corner of my eye, I did. But when I looked direct he sort of faded away. Denise saw him yesterday, too."

Denise was his wife. He walked through the connecting arch to the bar, leaving me free to speak my

mind. I was firmly of the materialist view and placed no credence in such stories. Alan, too, had announced himself a convinced Democritean when I first met him, so it confused me when he quarrelled with my scepticism. "Don't tell me you believe in ghosts," I said acidly.

"Ghosts, spirits, call them what you will," he said. "Lucretius was wrong: matter isn't everything. The Greeks from Homer on knew that everyone who has ever lived persists as...a shade, they called it." He leaned an arm on the counter. "Do you ever get the feeling that this place has suddenly become very crowded, even though there's hardly anyone here?"

"No, I don't."

He looked up at me with a critical little frown. "But they are swarming all around you right now. People from everywhere, from all times. It's mostly untrue that ghosts haunt the places where they lived. Lively places can't hold them. They have almost no vitality, you see. So they drift down to the nadir, to humanity's lowest trough of mental dullness."

"That sounds like Donnington all right."

"That's right; you can travel the world over, and not find people so uniformly lacking in imagination. And the Bell is its locus. It is the oldest building in Donnington, and has soaked up its qualities over the centuries. Also it is a social meeting place, and that makes it easier for ghosts. So this is the place where they all come to, flitting in and out in a kind of oscillation."

He fell silent as a third customer barged in. It had gladdened me to see Alan break his rule of never saying anything of interest. But his fantasizing disconcerted me. After he had spoken I did indeed seem to feel a heavy stillness descend like a dead weight. Alan grew pale, seemed almost to flicker. I myself felt pale and insubstantial; silent presences seemed to press all around me. Only the red-cheeked ruffian who was now banging on the counter to attract service seemed alive.

Yet which was more real? Is not life itself only a blink between conception and dying? Have not a dozen generations flickered in and out of the Bell Inn? Are we not more ghostly than the dead?

Alan was right about the Bell. Donnington's population had expanded dramatically since the war, as its land use was changed from farming to housing, but the Bell had not changed. It stood alone and isolated a little way beyond the edge of the residential area, as though unable to be assimilated. It had inexplicably failed to benefit from the thousands of potential new customers, despite being the only public house for some distance. On its other side there stretched a tangled and unpeopled landscape.

It was not, however, the only drinking place in the immediate vicinity. Scarcely a hundred yards away, as the crow flies, lies the clubhouse of the local bowls association. I had never set foot there, and so it was a place of vague mystery in my mind. A few weeks later that same year, a flat period in the Bell's business, I was again in the lounge with Alan. It was one of those lingering summer evenings when the sun seems to wander endlessly throughout the low sky, and to have lost the path that will take it beneath the

Earth. The lounge was almost empty, and very still. Present were only myself, Alan, and some previous acquaintance of his who was drunk, and was distressing him with ebullient, demanding comradeship.

It gave me some satisfaction to see Alan thus rewarded for his taste in conversation. While his "friend" was absent in the toilet he hurriedly emptied his glass. "I think I'll go round the back and try out the bowling club," he said, and walked quickly out.

To my sensibilities his decision was as brave as Christopher Columbus's. The bowling clubhouse has a restricted membership and arriving alone, unaccompanied by a member, he should not even be admitted, by the rules. Myself I had never even considered trying to go there. Such is my cowardly addiction to familiar places that I had only the vaguest idea of how it might be reached, surrounded as it is by hedges and fences. For these reasons it was invested with the glamour of a secret society in my mind, a forbidden dell in the forest, a club *in camera*. That Alan was prepared to breach these barriers if he could came as one of those surprises which his personality presented from time to time.

In less than an hour he was back, trusting his tormentor to have departed (which he had). "What was it like?" I asked him.

"All right. But it's as empty as here. Only one or two people there."

It seemed that no one had questioned his presence. He had not even been asked to sign the visitors' book. I listened to his account with fascination, as though he were describing a journey to another continent. I imagined him negotiating the difficult transition to the clubhouse by the light of the sinking sun – by what route I had no idea. I imagined the scene in the hidden chamber. There would be a fading quality to it, I thought. The light would be failing. The people there would not speak, only stare vacantly. They would seem distant – different, as though the place belonged to another universe having only a tenuous connection with our own.

A few days later I confessed these private impressions to Alan. He knew immediately what I was talking about. He even had a name for it: *back-sense*. "When you get a parcel through the post and don't know what's in it, that parcel becomes magical, the essence of Christmas," he said. "If somewhere seems out of bounds to you, even if it is only a back room in a pub which you think of as someone else's territory, then it has a special glamour. That's *back-sense*. It contributes more to our general perception of the world than you might think. People see ghosts through *back-sense*."

"So ghosts aren't real, then?" I said with a smile.

"Of course they are real. *Back-sense* is real. It provides the backdrop to the cruder role of sensory perception."

"Well, at any rate you didn't find any ghosts in the Wendy House," I joked.

The Wendy House is the local colloquialism for the Bowling Green Clubhouse. Why, I have never discovered. Since a Wendy House is a play house of a size to accommodate children but too small to admit adults, I have surmised it was coined by some wag on seeing members' children running about one

sunny afternoon. Privately, the name had only reinforced my feeling of exclusivity.

Alan was looking at me sidelong. "Oh, there are ghosts there. More than you can ever imagine."

"I thought you said all ghosts came here, in the Bell."

"Yes, the ghosts of all the dead. But there are ghosts of a second kind, who don't come here. The ghosts of all those who have never lived, and never will."

He swallowed some beer. "You realize what a ghost is, don't you? What spirit is? It is the *kosmos's* memory."

I laughed shortly. "The universe is a thing. It doesn't have a memory."

"But it does," he reproved. "Haven't you read Plato's *Timaeus*? The *kosmos* consists of *soma*, or body, and *psyche*. The essential thing about *psyche* is memory. Without it you wouldn't even know who you are. In the same way the *kosmos* wouldn't be *kosmos* – wouldn't be order. Wouldn't be able to produce anything."

"Well what's this about people who never existed? How can it remember those?"

"Take a pack of ordinary playing cards. Do you know the number of possible permutations of those fifty-two cards?"

"Yes. Factorial fifty-two."

"Is that what it's called? Anyway I'm told it's greater than the estimated number of particles in the whole universe. If we were to assume that every shuffle produces a random ordering, then in the whole history of playing cards it's most unlikely that any one permutation has ever occurred twice. Or ever will."

I could see what was coming. "Now I suppose you are going to throw human DNA at me."

"Yes. Think how much vaster than the permutations of playing cards are the permutations of human genes. For every person who has or ever will exist, there are billions who might have existed but never will. The *kosmos* carries a knowledge of these unrealized people – a sort of pre-memory. These ghosts are far more attenuated and remote than the ghosts of the once-living, of course, and they crowd into the Wendy House. Some of them would like to be alive, you see, but the closest they can come to it is to be as near as possible to the ghosts of the dead. They would come to the Bell itself if they could, but a barrier separates the real from the potential, and they can't cross it."

"So they spend their time playing bowls, I suppose."

"Actually you are very nearly right. Being a games club as well as a social club makes it easier for them to congregate there. Ghosts of that kind spend most of their time playing games. They can't engage in the real world, you see."

Thoughtfully he added, "This is what the notion 'spirit' actually means. It's simply all the possible orderings of existing material objects, such as atoms. That's why they say that the world of spirit is greater than the world of matter."

This was a brilliant conception, though one which Alan, I suspected, had thought up on the spur of the moment. I would have pursued it further, but just then he turned from me and started talking to someone else. About football, I think.



I attributed Alan's bizarre ideas to his reading of ancient literature, and had tried to sound cynical, but in truth it became annoying to find that his fantasies had begun to affect my involuntary perceptions. On entering the Bell I would experience, first a dead stillness, and then the shivery feeling of a ghostly crowd. Out of the corner of my eye I repeatedly glimpsed people attired in all manner of costume, only to have them vanish when I looked directly. To remind myself that I was a victim of suggestion should have been enough to dispel the apparitions; but it did not. Alan had been too clever for me.

The sun was once more a pathless wanderer when I next came in to find him alone. There is something about a nearly empty pub which invites one to move on, and we discussed this possibility as I drank my first pint.

Normally we would have had to take a long walk. Instead, a brave proposal came to my mind.

"Let's see if the Wendy House is any better."

He agreed, but reluctantly, I thought, and was slow to empty his glass. At length we stepped outside. The light now had that limpid quality which it gains just before it begins to fade. There was no hint of a breeze.

The rough track which connects the Bell to the road also joins, near to the pub, a narrow paved path which strikes off at a right angle. Its further side is lined by a stand of tall poplars, its near side by a ten-foot-tall link-wire fence. A little way along it a second path strikes off to the right, again at a right angle, and is guarded by a wire-mesh gate. This second path runs dead straight for a considerable distance, and ends finally at the bowling green and adjoining clubhouse. The complexity of the access had emphasized the club's remoteness in my mind, though to others it is probably perfectly straightforward. I headed unthinkingly towards the first path, only to have Alan pluck at my sleeve.

"Not that way. Over here."

He led me through the screen of beech trees and round the corner of the building. There, a lane leads away into the countryside and out of Donnington altogether, petering out eventually among the old slag-heaps which now have become marshy and overgrown with all kinds of wild plant, creating a wilderness of interest, I had always thought, to a naturalist. Neither poplars nor beeches enclose this lane, but high hedges of privet interwoven with hawthorn, so that one can see nothing of the surroundings. We walked a few yards and then Alan stopped and carefully examined the hedge to our left. For a moment he seemed uncertain, but then located what he was looking for. He inserted an arm, pushed through, and disappeared.

He had found what was a weakness, rather than a gap, in the otherwise impenetrable hedge, which was luckily free of thorns at this point. Had he known of its existence from the beginning? Was this how he had been able to enter the clubhouse unaccompanied by a member? I followed, forcing myself through the green privet, and joined him on the other side.

A long grassy paddock lay before us, bounded on the further side by the gated path. And there, in the far corner, stood the wooden shack of the clubhouse.

A silly thought occurred to me. *We shouldn't be able to get in at all. It's a Wendy House.* Then the

sense of the adventure took hold. "Here we go, then," I said, and stepped out, soft grass under my shoes.

After a few moments I sensed an absence, and turned. Alan was no longer there. He had deserted me and gone back.

I shrugged. It was not the first time I had experienced this particular aspect of his eccentricity. Once, we had agreed to take half an hour's walk to a pub in another district. After only a few minutes there, irritated by some imagined slight, or else in a neurotic mood, he had simply walked off.

Unwilling to be cheated of my journey into the unknown, I continued, and soon could see the meticulously tended bowling green, on which no one was playing. There was no one at all in sight, and the clubhouse was perched solitary and silent. I walked round it and found a closed door. Feeling strongly like an interloper, I turned the knob, pushed, and stepped cautiously inside.

What a feeling of vacancy there was in the Wendy House! I saw a long narrow room, fitted with tables and chairs along the sides. At one end was the bar. There, three or four blank, nondescript faces turned towards me as I stood nervously, carefully closing the door at my back.

It did not signify anything to me at the time that I could not identify any of those faces as belonging to the local community. Being a timber hut and not a brick pub, the clubhouse had smaller windows, and what light entered lent the room a fading air. The atmosphere had exactly that mystique which my imagination had bestowed upon it when Alan had made his earlier visit. For some reason this failed to frighten me. It seemed inevitable, like the closing phrase of a melody.

Although I was clearly a stranger no one challenged my presence; but in one respect my experience differed from Alan's. A book was produced which I was asked to sign, while someone else wrote his name in the members' column. I paid the twenty pence visitor's fee, and bought a drink.

To stand at the bar in dead silence, with no one speaking, made me feel uncomfortable. After a minute or two I walked down the room to sit at a table, intending to use the perspective to gain a good view of the room. As soon as my back was turned on the bar the shivery crowd sensation I had felt in the Bell returned, but more ethereal. It was like being brushed with something very soft.

As I took my seat the sensation vanished. Through one of the small windows the reddened sun suddenly poured itself liquidly from between streaks of coloured cloud where it had sauntered unseen. Momentarily I was dazzled. When my vision cleared I noticed, for the first time, a book lying on the adjacent table. Its title riveted my attention immediately:

#### **The Book of Science-Fiction Writers**

A garish rocketship cover, probably borrowed from one of the old pulp magazines, glared out. I picked the book up, savoured the cover, then opened it and soon immersed myself in its contents.

In a preface the editors claimed their survey to be comprehensive from the turn of the century on. Every published author was given a critical appraisal – long or short, as merited – in alphabetical order, and a

partial bibliography. From the start the book confused me. In a short time I was totally mystified. Where were the giants of the field I knew so well? Where were the famous Asimov, Clarke, Herbert, whose names even casual readers could prattle off? Where were the stalwarts more likely to be familiar mostly to fans, such as van Vogt, Harness, Anderson, Williamson and the rest, who had done so much to guide my youth? I could not find a single name known to me anywhere in the book. It was as though the great golden age of the genre had been filled with different people altogether. The most popular science-fiction writers, I read, were John Verwood and Aleistair MacAdam – the latter's future history series, under the collective title of "The Jovian Empire," was especially praised. Even the marvellous formative magazines, *Astounding*, *Startling Stories*, *Super Science Stories*, *Planet*, and all the others, had been replaced. By *Ultimate Science Fiction* (which, under the editorship of G.W. Harding, sound like an analogue of *Astounding*), *Incredible Stories*, *Tales of the Infinite*, and so on.

Who could have taken the trouble to invent and publish such a complete yet wholly contrived directory? Musing, I raised my eyes from the book. The clubhouse seemed to have filled while my attention had been taken. A crowd stood near the bar. All were looking towards me, their stares melting sheepishly away as I noticed. All but one, that is. He was a small man in a shabby green jacket, who came walking towards me with awkward movements, his face strained and anxious, breaking into an ingratiating smile as he approached.

"Are you a science-fiction fan?" he asked, nodding to the book.

"Yes."

He sat down at the table. When he began talking I knew I had met the genuine article. For one thing he did not tackle the subject directly but chatted in general terms, letting me know that he acknowledged that the bond existed. He asked me if I had much of a collection. "I've lost most of mine, I'm afraid," he added sadly. "Never get rid of your collection, man. I could cry over it."

Then he came to a point he had been shy of broaching. "I write a bit of it too. Actually I'm in this book." He snatched up the directory, opened it near the beginning, flicked back a couple of pages and laid it down in front of me. I bent to follow his pointing finger. Barrington J. Bayley. The name headed a very short entry. I squashed the impulse to ask him his real name; the one he showed me was obviously a pseudonym. Or rather it would have been, had any of the names in the book been of people who really existed.

I scanned the brief, terse description of his trifling contribution to this phantom literature. Pushing the book aside, eyes still downcast, I became suddenly, absolutely certain that a throng of people had gathered around Bayley, and were all looking down on our exchange with avid interest. I looked up quickly. No one was present. There was only the confused press by the bar.

"I didn't know there was another fan in Donnington," I said.

He made no answer. I gulped down what was left

of my drink. My adventure was beginning to pall. I felt a need to return to the familiar. "Do you ever go to the Bell?" I asked him.

"The Bell?"

I made a gesture. "The pub over the way."

"Er, I'm a member here."

"It's a pub," I chuckled, "you don't have to be a member."

"Of course not."

"I'm going there now. Would you like to come along?"

"Will it be all right?"

"Why, you're of drinking age, aren't you?" I heaved myself to my feet.

On my way to the door it seemed a wonder to me that the Wendy House could be so crowded with people and still seem vacant, as though there were no more than three or four people in it. Yet when I glanced around me, that was all there was. I went through the door and then looked back to see if Bayley was still with me and had not, like Alan, chosen to retreat without even a polite word. I watched him encounter the step and stumble, nearly falling as though he hadn't known it was there. Once outside the door he looked about him in bewilderment, like a cat I had once known which had been raised in a flat, and was then introduced to the outdoors for the first time. He looked down the long straight path, and shook his head dolefully.

"I won't be able to pass the gate."

Alan had once given his definite opinion that all science-fiction writers are crazy. Bayley's inane remark was likely part of a story he was framing in his mind. "We don't have to go through the gate," I told him. "There's a secret short cut. Over here."

His step quickened as I led him on a slanting course across the paddock. But he became fretful when, in the quickly fading light, I had trouble locating the weak spot in the hedge. At last I found the yielding point, testing it with my arm.

"Will I be able to get through?" Bayley asked, in an incredibly anxious voice.

"Come on, it's all right." Privet leaves brushed against my face as I forced my way through towards the lane. I reached back and tugged at the sleeve of his shabby green jacket...

For a moment disbelief and lack of self-confidence constrained me; then a hand guided me gently forward by my left arm. Privet leaves brushed against my face as, with a rustling sound, I pushed my way through and stood alone in the now shadowed, darkened lane. Ahead, a lighted pub sign glimmered between two beech trees.

It's understandable, isn't it? Someone at the nadir of nonexistence, who wants to be real, and to write science fiction? But I haven't seen Alan since. Either he has finally tired of me and frequents a more distant pub, or as I think, he is in the Wendy House. There has to be some sort of exchange, surely, to keep the cosmic balance?

I am not a member there, of course. And so I trudged on to the Bell, to swallow some pints of Tetley's bitter and disdain the yokels. ●



# Barrington J. Bayley

## An Annotated Bibliography

Andy Robertson

**B**arrington J. Bayley (1937- ): underpaid, under-recognized, kobold who has been forging gems beneath the roots of British sf since the glory days of *New Worlds*. Occasionally emerges at sf conventions to drink a lot. He is considered a premier "ideas man," though he has sometimes repudiated the label.

At their unconstrained best, his stories explore basic physical, philosophical and existential themes with great intellectual daring, often working in ancient religious and supernatural imagery with surprising effect. They are typically set in a very distant future with no real historical connections with the present, but with a recognizable or even archaic social structure, and they are very definitely novels of concept, not of character.

Bayley's kaleidoscopic cosmologies are carefully thought out, and almost disturbingly self-consistent and plausible. Oddly enough, I think that having a reasonable "conventional" scientific education only makes one appreciate them more. The science in most "hard sf" can be an embarrassment, not so much because it's wrong as because it is so obviously half-digested and regurgitated. But Bayley is most definitely (most definitely I say) an original.

Bayley has not produced a full-length novel since 1985, but he continues to publish short stories in *Interzone* and elsewhere. The time is surely ripe for another collection.

### **Star Virus (Ace, 1970)**

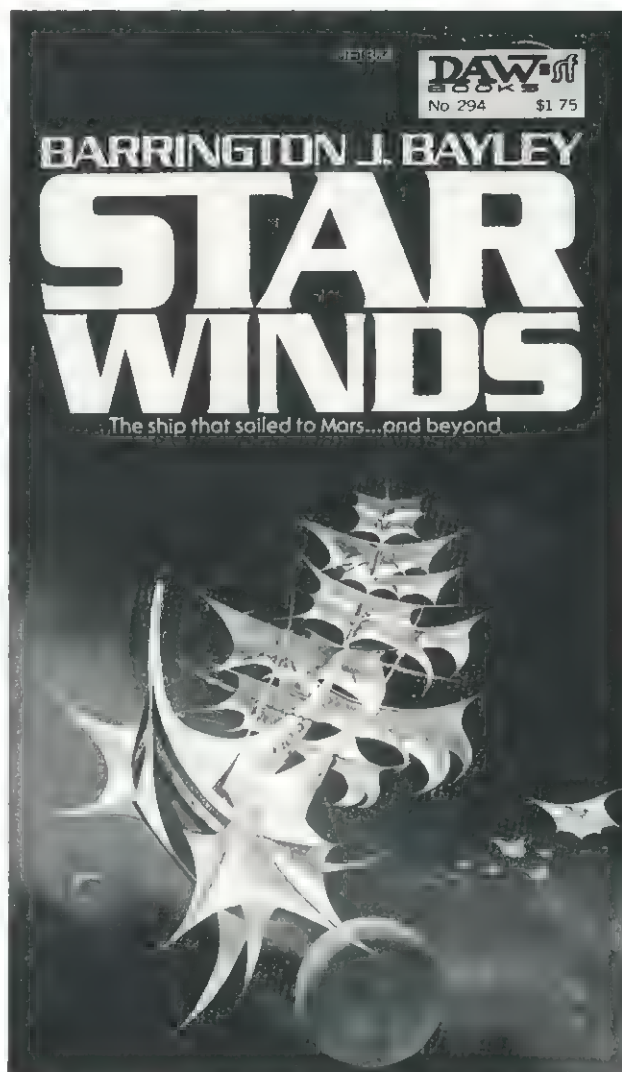
Novel. Some sort of existential barrier surrounds the Galaxy, and the swarming tribes of humanity seek to transcend it. Bayley's first novel, a meandering space opera with its good bits echt but rather thinly spread.

### **Annihilation Factor (Ace, 1972)**

Novel. The Patch is wobbling about the galaxy, scarfing up all the conscious minds on any planet it encounters. How will the near-immortal aristocratic rotters who run the Empire deal with it? And why does anyone the Patch rejects turn into a particularly bolshy sort of Marxist? I don't understand either.

### **Empire of Two Worlds (Ace, 1972)**

Novel. Fairly minor tale about gangsters from a dim, dusty planet who come back to Earth via some sort of matter transmitter and take over. It marks the start of a distinct fondness for writing about criminals and other low-life, perhaps mainly to act as thicko foils for the author's startling ideas.



### **Collision Course (DAW, 1973; republished as *Collision with Chronos*, Allison & Busby, 1977)**

Novel. Bayley's first real corker. A complex, clogged book exceptionally rich with ideas. What defines the direction of time's arrow? And are there more directions than two? On Earth fascists experiment with crude time-travel, and those alien ruins appear to be getting suspiciously younger. Meanwhile (or rather, "meanwhile"), a Chineseian space culture which has long since mastered the manipulation of time looks on, and the Oblique Entity lurks near. Recommended.

### **The Fall of Chronopolis (DAW, 1974)**

Novel. The great Empire of Chronopolis rules

thousands of years: mighty time-dreadnoughts patrolling in the "strat" guard it, and the Imperial Archives are buffered against the effects of all possible Reality Wars. But the Empire is menaced by enemies on its futureward frontier, and by cultists who worship demons in the gulf of Virtual Time. Recommended, for its gorgeous campness as well as its ideas.

**The Soul of the Robot** (Doubleday, 1974)

Novel. Jasperodus the robot believes he is conscious and self-aware. But for thousands of years it has been known that only human beings can be conscious, and robots, however intelligent, lack the spark. If robots can do everything human beings can do, what is consciousness? And, for that matter, how can human beings prove they really are conscious, and not just acting as if they were? A picaresque in which our hero attempts to resolve the mystery of his origin and being by various means, (including a memorable Indefatigable Steel Phallus). Highly recommended.

**The Garments of Caean** (Doubleday, 1976)

Novel. Man's natural form is lumpy, adventitious, and incomplete. Clothes make the man. On the worlds of the Caean cluster, clothes appear to practically control the man. How has this remarkable social setup evolved? And is there something menacing behind it? Need you ask? (The UK edition – Fontana, 1978 – is expanded.)

**The Grand Wheel** (DAW, 1977)

Novel. The master criminals who control the great Gambling syndicates are the real powers in human space. Now they want to play the masters of the Universe – with humanity as the stake! How far up this hierarchy can the winners go? And what are the prizes at the top levels? And just why are the laws of physics quite so arbitrary?

**The Knights of the Limits** (Allison & Busby, 1978)

Collection. Notable tales include "The Exploration of Space" (wherein the narrator is addressed by inter-continuum voyagers via the knight on his chess-board), "Mutation Planet," "The Bees Of Knowledge" and "The Cabinet Of Oliver Naylor." Also included are "All The King's Men," "Me And My Antronoscope" (a device for seeing through solid rock), "Exit From City Five," "An Overload" and "The Problem Of Morley's Emission." Highly recommended.

**Star Winds** (DAW, 1978)

Novel. The alchemists were right after all! Starships sail by catching the winds of ether, the "fifth substance" or quintessence. A boy from backward Earth is caught up in the politics and war of the interstellar kingdoms. The threat of the Kerek Mind is countered by the surreptitious work of master alchemists. Disproof of the atomic theory, and the triumph of True Philosophy. Alchemical versions of such familiar sf tropes as lasers and neutronium (= pure, elemental, earth) are a particular delight. Recommended.

**The Seed of Evil** (Allison & Busby, 1979)

Collection. Includes the excellent stories "Sporting With the Chid" and "The Radius Riders." Also "The

Seed Of Evil," "Integrity," "Farewell, Dear Brother," "The God Gun," "The Ship That Sailed the Ocean of Space," "Man In Transit," "Wizard Wazo's Revenge," "The Infinite Searchlight," "Perfect Love," "The Countenance" and "Life Trap."

**The Pillars of Eternity** (DAW, 1982)

Novel. The Universe is a cycle of eternal recurrence. One man, impelled by an experience of transcendent suffering, attempts to derail the whole thing by carrying out an act of free will. Just one unpredestined act, however tiny, will ensure that he never exists to suffer again...But what is free will?

**The Zen Gun** (DAW, 1983)

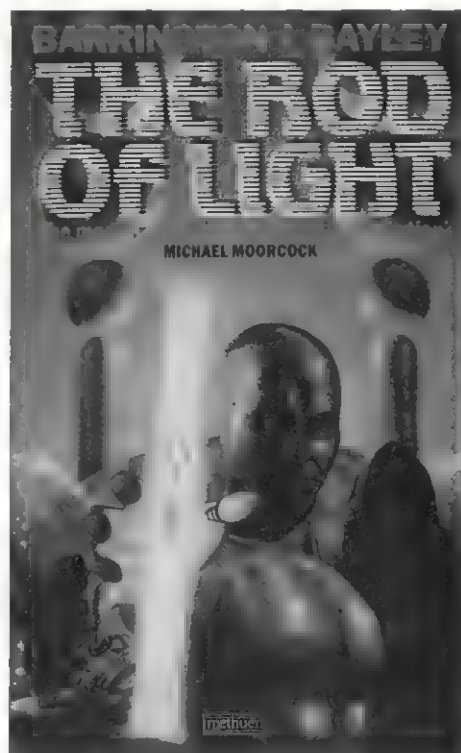
Novel. Carved from wood, the weapon requires a Zen master to operate it properly. Its powers appear to be infinite. But who will control it – its rightful owner, the animal-cyborg agents of the decadent Empire, or the thingies from a different sort of space who are currently seeping in through the holes opened up by its clumsy misuse? Highly recommended.

**The Rod of Light** (Methuen, 1985)

Novel. Darker, more focused, sequel to *The Soul of the Robot*. Super-intelligent robots attempt to steal consciousness from human beings: Jasperodus must decide where his loyalties lie. The nature of consciousness revealed. Recommended. (After publication of this book, contracted by Allison & Busby but not published by them, Bayley took those publishers to court over unpaid royalties, only to see them go promptly bankrupt.)

**The Forest of Peldain** (DAW, 1985)

Novel. A fairly minor potboiler concerning a pseudo-intelligent mass of vegetation and the unfortunate consequences of attacking it. Bayley's last new book to date.





# Four Ways to Breathe

## John Clute

From America, land of milk and honey, slides giftlike into view a new book from Diana Wynne Jones, *A Sudden Wild Magic* (AvoNova/William Morrow, \$22), flowing into the mind like liquid glass, befriendingly. It is marketed for adults, but seems very much of a piece with her work as a whole, almost all of which has been published for teenagers. If there is something whirling about the clarity of that work – if she sometimes over-indulges in timeslip and/or alternate-reality plot pretzels – there has been at the same time throughout her career an abiding sense of narrative good will: in *A Sudden Wild Magic* the protagonists somehow behave as though they were eager to help us through the maze, no matter how entangled they may find themselves in the hooks and ladders of a story which tends to mock synopsis. This sense that a book partners its readers may be one way of describing a book which has been written for a younger audience; and it is true that, now and then in *A Sudden Wild Magic*, actions and their actors seem marginally too knowable for comfort, after the fashion of narratives which seek to bond with their readers: but the gladness wins through.

The plot is not simple, and it would be easy to mock some of the direr codicils that tongue-tie some of the patters of description, through which is unfolded for us a pixilated concatenation of quasi-inter/intra-nested universes, ours being one. Earth – but most particularly Britain – has long benefited from the monitoring activities of a Ring of workers in magic, who have done the sums for us, kept the balances from going too far awry, and generally cushioned the planet – but most particularly Britain, which is monitored by a particularly efficient Ring – from disaster. But nowadays things seem to be going slightly sour – it is a sign of the comfortingness of *A Sudden Wild Magic* that global warming is allowed to stand as the main problem facing us, even here in Bat the Snatcher's Solitude Called Peace – and a computer boffin wizard named Mark Lister, who is high in the Ring, begins to understand that the late 20th-century Earth is being haemorrhaged by an unknown force. We soon learn that Arth, one of the systems adjacent to ours, has been

for centuries siphoning off the precious bodily fluids of Earthly ingenuity, and that this adjacent comity has in fact created global warming to inspire us into attempting to cure the problem. (At this point, one does begin to feel, while bonding into this book, rather like an ostrich bonding into sand.) Whatever, Mark Lister tells the rest of the Ring what's on; and the Ring gets down to work.

The rest of the novel, set mostly on Arth, depicts with ingenuity and warmth and the occasional knotted shoelace how the task force from Earth deals with the exceedingly complex geo-political situation obtaining in the pirate world, which includes several kingdoms, a couple of politically-empowered affinity groups defined by species and/or magical ability, and a kind of orbital arcology, hoisted up and kept up in space by magic. It is from this arcology, run like a sex-shy monastery by a muck-is-brass mage deaf to the pleasure principle, that the thefts from Earth have been taking place. There is very little advantage in trying to detail precisely how the large cast manages to reach the end of the book from this point: but wise sex comes into it; and rebellion; and a wizened but ultimately prepotent king from Arth puts his foot down; and centaurs contribute; and an evil witch is defeated by a combo of lovers and wise beings; and the gods take a part.

The most interesting character is the seeming old maid from Earth who is the most potent member of the Ring, and whose sapient natter makes sense of everything else. A reasonably good time is had by all. There is a sense of solace and plenitude and easy breathing throughout, sustaining the funhouse plot, reminding numerous deuteragonists to pull their socks up and get on with loving the immanent worlds and the opposite sex. It is a seasoned romp. Echoes of E.R. Eddison's *Zimiamvian Trilogy* may be harkened to, smilingly, by the burdened reader. Everyone else may percolate in this rare peace.

Less lacking in joy than last time, Tom Holt pulls up his socks, clenches his loins, gives birth to another comic novel, *Overtime* (Little Brown, £14.99). It has little of the

equipoise and flow of his two-volume sequence of non-genre books – comprising *Goatsong* (1989) and *The Walled Orchard* (1990) – about the historical Greek playwright Eupolis; nor has he yet returned to the intermittent flowing highs of *Expecting Someone Taller* (1987) or *Who's Afraid of Beowulf?* (1988). But although it sounds like faint praise to say so, *Overtime* is very much better than either *Flying Dutch* (1991) or *Ye Gods!* (1992), both of which read like Mike Gatting telling us, through the tetanus of his jaw, that South Africa was a picnic. From Holt's bad books, two things were missing: love of the world created; and a protagonist so fully part of the created world that love could sow through the chaff of jokes.

We cannot ask of Tom Holt that (like Terry Pratchett) he write as if he loved the world he made, though we can suggest to him that love does make the worlds go round; but we can say that the lack of an embedded protagonist, being clearly deliberate, is clearly subject to comment. Holt's books are comedies of displacement and incongruity: against the modern world (in which we meet a nebbish protagonist who becomes embroiled in the brouhaha) will be juxtaposed the German pantheon, or the Flying Dutchman, or (in the tale on review) Blondel. A three-legged race through Bedlam then ensues, with the protagonist protesting, feebly, throughout that it's all a bit much, chaps. There are jokes, some of them physical, some of them verbal; but few sustained flights of anything like lunacy or the flashes of theodicy that make a Wodehouse or a Pratchett glow, at moments, as though they were wise to the lures of maya: and wed maya: and lived in the glade with maya. So far, with Holt, the end of the tale marks a return to something like normalcy, or dust. It is a letting-down prefigured throughout by the gritted teeth of the telling.

But this time, for pages on end, we slip off the squirrel-wheel of fire, and paddle along in the midst of the tale, almost up to our necks in something very much like *fleuve*. Blondel has extracted the usual Holt protagonist from certain death in a World War Two bomber, and sidles up and down the timelines with him in search of Richard the Lion Heart, who is depicted by Holt in the style of the Robin Hood legends (as a wise and humble monarch) rather than according to the more normal (post-Hood) consensus (as a spendthrift and hysterical bozo); as a fictional character, however, this Richard is as close to a wise person Holt has yet wished to give us. The cast is huge, the story immensely complicated, the funny bits much less intermittent than previously. There are moments of stress, when protagonist Guy Goodlet all too

transparently speaks Holt's real thoughts (like the bird in Siegfried betraying Mime) about the cruddy story he's got trapped into, and its creator conveys very little real love for the secondary world he's made for us; but we're a hell of a lot closer this time.

Tom Holt could bring tears of joy to the world. Let us say he will learn to breathe inside his books, and do so.

**T**he impulse to like *Warpath* (Tor, \$18.95) almost makes one lie to oneself about the experience of reading it. Tony Daniel, whose first novel this is, has published several stories over the last few years, among them a novella called "Candle" (1991) which presumably serves as a base for the first third of this book. Candle is the name of the planet. Warpath is what the Mississippian Indians, who have lived on this planet for centuries after their discovery in the 14th century Common Era of the mental legerdemain which allows them to traverse the Real World between the stars at FTL velocity and who have only for the last few centuries had to put up with Western Civilization which has only recently learned how to do FTL stuff, go on. Will James is the name of the protagonist, who tells the whole thing to us personally, who never tells us why he's named after a famous writer of the 20th century Common Era, who is in fact a reconstituted radio wave broadcast centuries earlier from Earth in a pre-FTL era attempt to seed the stars, who has lived on Candle for nine years where he runs a newspaper, and who chunters away with the uneasy loquacity of an Alistair Maclean mercenary, but who is in fact anything but the central focus of the action of *Warpath*.

The Indians of Candle go on the warpath in their canoes, which they propel through atmosphere by the same means of locomotion that they use to propel the same canoes between the stars, because the Westpac settlers have taken advantage of a legal claim made by the evil elder sister of a half-human girl in order to gain from the girl the extraction rights to the extremely valuable loosa clay which has the property of being able to encapsulate digital readouts of humans and also of chocalacas, who are the Real World inhabitants who become paternal mascots of selected Indians and who are themselves divided into two factions, the first wishing to reinhabit the Eden of the phenomenal world through human perceptions, and the second wishing to suck humans for the nectar of their pain (not a new concept), the leader of the first faction being the father of the half-human girl, which is why she has extraction rights to the loosa in the first place, and the plot thickens. The girl is a shape-changer. The protagonist is half in love with her. The Indian Chief, with whom

she's thick, is his pal. One of the human factions on Candle (and elsewhere) is composed of religious fanatics, which Daniel calls the Clerisy, apparently in the belief that Coleridge was wrong to invent the term in order to distinguish learned men as a class from the clergy as a class; these Clerisy people espouse ecological views, and are otherwise vicious. There are group minds around. There are a number of computer-driven or generated half-minds, which Daniel calls halfsent. They run machines. There's a lot more: a trip to Earth; a battle or two; the defeat of the evil chocalaca; et cetera.

It is all told by the hapless protagonist in a tone of numbing, secretly self-satisfied, breathlessly wordy befuddlement, and drags on for a large number of pages beyond its modest remit. There are enough ideas here for a dozen novels; there is enough novel here for a short story.

**N**ote. There is not much point in attempting to review, in medias res, Tanith Lee's ongoing *Blood Opera* sequence, the first volume of which, *Dark Dance* (1992), I commented on briefly in *Interzone* 59. The second volume, *Personal Darkness* (Little Brown, £14.99), carries on in the same arterial tone, like a lorry with no time for rest stops. There are moments when it is almost as though Lee were pushing herself, at the prow of this juggernaut, outside normal atmosphere, as though she were climbing some Martian peak into some territory not yet discerned by folk; and at these moments the words almost seem to crack into metamorphosis. But not quite, not yet.

The story starts slowly, and only after a hundred pages or so does one realize that it is clearly going to build without cessation until the last moment, somewhere around page 440. After causing great chaos at the end of volume one, Ruth, incestuous child of Rachaela begot upon her by her own unaging father Adamus of the Scarabae, is at loose in the subfusc spite-filled nightmare of suburban 1980s England, and begins to kill people. Rachaela moves with the surviving Scarabae — who may be vampires, but who increasingly resemble some kind of Egyptian undead or gods or aliens from above the timberline of Mars or elsewhere — to a nicer mansion. Malach and Althene, cognate Scarabae from another line, arrive on request to take care of Ruth. Malach — rendered by Lee in a style almost phosphorescently fascinated by his speed-lined kinesia, his antique Weltschmerz, his Kung-Fu-ish latency — soon finds Ruth, and attempts to train her off the wanton kill. His success — or failure — and the various convulsions which ensue, bring the reader little closer to a sense that *Blood Opera* has come close to ending. In the text, the music

is usually the more romantic sort of 20th-century composer, from Rachmanninoff on up. There is quite a bit of sex; some of it — between two human beings, Nobbi Ives and Stella Atkins, in particular — is astonishingly like the best sex one could imagine for oneself: like dying, like supernatural health, like continuing to breathe. We are carried on.

We are hoping Tanith Lee will mount the caldera and teach us breathing there.

(John Clute)

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## New Maps of Oz

### Paul J. McAuley

**N**icola Griffith's first novel, *Ammonite* (HarperCollins, £4.99), flies all the banners of traditional sf. It is set on a lost colony world where civilization has dwindled to Iron Age barbarism, and its plot is essentially that of a rite-of-passage, in which the urgent need to resolve two interlinked biological mysteries provides the excuse for long, lovingly detailed travelogues in which the protagonist learns. It looks, at first glance, like a surrender to escapism, but it is no such thing. Beneath the banners, it is armed to the teeth for war on convention.

For Griffith's agenda lies not so much in retelling a familiar story; nor is it in the back-history of the lost colony, which is conveniently obscured by a long gap in which interstellar colonies can be founded and lost while on Earth the central character can have held a post at the University of Aberystwyth even though a thousand years are like an evening gone. Nor are the biological puzzles precisely at the heart of the novel, for both are resolved about half-way through.

No, Griffith's real interest is to traverse an imaginary landscape entirely populated by women and then to redeem the journey by showing that it wasn't quite what you thought it was. *Ammonite* is not concerned with deploying tropes, but reinventing them. It is a novel about exploring a world without men, but it is not a novel about a feminist utopia where to remove men is to remove Original Sin. It is less of a world tour than a Long March.

The world is Grenchstom's Planet, or GP, or Jeep, where an endemic virus has winnowed the original colonists free of men. Women survive in Iron Age tribes and settlements (I am trying hard not to use the word *Celtic* here), somehow are able to bear babies which are not clones — alert readers will hardly pause to put two and two together to get at least half the answer straight away — and are mysteriously in harmony with the world's wild climate



and geography. The Company team which made first contact with the lost colony has likewise been winnowed by the virus, and the surviving women are now in quarantine on the planet's surface. Marghe, an anthropologist, has been sent by the Company to try and solve the mystery, fortified with an experimental vaccine against the virus. The Company wants to use jeep for whatever it is worth and get out; Marghe has already been used by the Company, and is determined not to be betrayed again.

The solution does not come through scientific method: in this at least *Ammonite* is true to its traditions. Rather, it comes through insight and experience won during Marghe's forced trek across the world after she loses contact with the Company base and is captured by a warlike nomadic tribe. Marghe escapes the tribe and the attentions of a near-psychotic tribeswoman who has fixated upon her, crosses a bitter winter landscape and is rescued, near death, by the women of a small settlement. She deliberately stops taking her vaccine, survives the ravages of the virus, and through the teaching of the wise woman who cares for her learns how two women may quicken babies in each other. And more, she learns how to read the world. By taking the world – or its avatar, the virus – into herself, she is enlightened. She takes the wise woman as a lover, chooses to become pregnant, and travels around the world to the Company base just in time to avert a battle between the nomads and the stranded Company security forces.

All of this sounds more exciting than it often is, especially for the first 200 pages or so, which is to say about half the novel. There is little actual plot, in terms of tangling events towards a crisis and a resolution, although that does happen, eventually, but instead there are great dreamy stretches of description of a world that is really not much stranger than ours. Nor is Griffith free of the vice of dramatizing a character's conflict through long, agonized, internalized arguments that do more to demonstrate the author's uncertainty than drive the plot forward. As a result, neither Marghe nor the leader of the surviving Company team (who shares some of the narrative weight) seem very sure of themselves, to the point that the reader often wonders when Marghe, who after all is a trained anthropologist, will actually start asking questions.

But the patient reader will be rewarded. Slowly, the novel begins to pay off. The territory it has covered, which at first glance is the territory covered in other rite-of-passage/travelogue/lost colony/biological-mystery novels from Le Guin's *Left Hand of Darkness* through Gentle's *Golden Witchbreed*, is revealed to be deeper

and richer than we'd thought. It is reclaimed, and with a vengeance, just as other echoes – such as the base commander's penchant for engaging in formal duelling matches after hard decisions (cf almost any Heinlein character, most especially in *Starship Troopers*) – are reclaimed and radicalized. All this is fine, but finer still is Griffith's ability to make us forget, not that every character is a woman, but the absence of men. In this she makes her world anew.

**I**nfection is the metaphor of our age: for all our hubris, we are still flesh, and viruses remind us that although we think we have conquered the world, we are still irredeemably of it. Sf would have it otherwise, of course. In Kevin J. Anderson's and Doug Beason's *Assemblers of Infinity* (Bantam Books, \$4.99) the infective agent is a virulent alien nanotechnology intent on not only infecting our bodies but dismantling them – but because this is an sf novel, hubris will out.

A mysterious structure on the Moon is found to have been made by bacteria-sized assemblers which are soon loose amongst the human colonists. The Lunar scientists and engineers, infected and apparently doomed, race to control the assemblers and to understand the purpose of the vast structures they have created. In short, it's a first-contact novel, traditional hard sf which uses extrapolation of up-to-the-minute technology to retool well-worn clichés. The futile attempts to contain the alien infection, for instance, echo those in *The Andromeda Strain* (and the purpose of the structures created by the assemblers is similar to that of the radio signals in *A for Andromeda*). The behaviour of the assemblers, which threaten to render everything down to a grey sludge, is topologically identical to that of the transcendently smart gene-engineered bacteria of *Blood Music*, most especially in a hermetic sub-plot in which untutored assemblers get loose in an Antarctic Research Base (an echo within an echo, in that we are reminded of the setting of *The Thing*), only to be destroyed by containment procedures before they do anything more than twist a couple of people into bizarre shapes.

And so on. Core sf consists of retold tales redressed with new metaphors. *Assemblers of Infinity* is core sf and knows it: fast-paced, efficiently told, populated by stock characters distinguished only by clip-on tags or quirks. Its agenda is that of the dominant (white American male) sf culture, which is to demonstrate that anything the Universe throws at humankind can be tamed by *illuminati* armed with appropriate technology. It domesticates infinity.

**G**raham Joyce's first novel, *Dreamside*, was a chimera: part horror, part fantasy, and fleshed out of solidly based speculation upon the nature of the act of dreaming. His second, *Dark Sister* (Headline, £15.99), follows the standard genre trajectory and Faustian morality of a horror novel, but is also an engaging and sympathetic examination of the empowerment of women through witchcraft.

Maggie Sanders and her husband discover an old journal hidden in the chimneypiece of a boarded-up fireplace, and Maggie finds herself identifying with its writer, Bella, a novice witch. She starts to test the journal's herbal lore, and Bella's story, developing in the journal like a photograph, parallels her own as she is drawn deeper into witchcraft. As her husband's archaeological excavation slowly uncovers evidence of Bella's grisly fate, Maggie's dabblings increasingly threaten not only her, but also her children and her marriage. Her new power reveals her husband's infidelity, and when she tries to use that same power against him, this misuse draws down not only Bella's restless spirit, but also that of Bella's dark sister, who seeks vengeance for the breaking of a chain of inherited power.

Joyce never tries for any *Grand Guignol* effect – he's a subtler writer than the blood'n'guts'n'rock'n'roll school. The power of his fantasy lies not so much in the power of his imagination, but in his careful evocation of the commonplace. In fact, his depiction of the banality of domesticity and of Maggie's flight from a marriage that increasingly seems like a trap, done with a fine eye for the telling detail, is more believable than the witchy manifestations of the dark sister's power (significantly, often in the form of stains). The result is a well-told, mature, cosily English horror novel, with an old-fashioned morality driving its intersecting arcs of personal and externalized crises, and a good deal of sentiment informing its ending.

**A**lso Noted:

Some short stories. Gardner Dozois has by now won so many awards for editing Isaac Asimov's *Science Fiction Magazine* that it is easy to forget that he is also a formidable writer. *Geodesic Dreams* (St Martin's Press, \$19.95) collects together a selection of his short fictions to remind us. They are carefully crafted variations of themes which are the common currency of sf: the End of the World tale, the Alien Invasion tale, The End of the World as Seen from a Bar tale – told with a polished literary fluency, from the heart.

Scott Bradfield's first short story collection, *The Secret Life of Houses*, was republished in the U.S. as *Dream of the Wolf*, with extra stories included.

Now that collection has been extended in turn, and has been published here as **Greetings From Earth** (Picador, £14.99). Okay? Bradfield started his career in *Interzone* with fine, skewed darkly comic fabulations – the apocalyptic “The Flash! Kid,” the dreamy dissolution of “The Dream of the Wolf” – that shared the metaphysical unease of sf’s best fiction, but none of its tradition. He has moved on. The unease has been sharpened to a scalpel edge, and it is the unease of living at the end of the 20th century. “The world is a very big confusing place,” one of his characters tells her unborn baby. “But that doesn’t mean there aren’t simpler places we can go... Dig down deep enough and eventually you come to this, this hard primal floor of the world, this place that existed long before history ever got here.” Bradfield’s fictions, informed by a dark deadpan humour, lets that primal floor show through.

Lastly, a novel somehow overlooked last year. This is not too late, I hope, to draw your attention to the fact that after the fictionalized autobiography of *Climbers*, M. John Harrison has returned to his highly individual brand of metaphysical fantasy in **The Course of the Heart** (Gollancz, £14.99).

Its structure is deceptively simple. Three students perform a ritual or rite under the supervision of a seedy mentor, Yaxley. None of them can remember quite what happens, but they are pursued by the consequences throughout their lives. Yaxley is no help, slipping deeper into a perverted search for ritual power until it kills him. Two students, Lucas Medlar and Pam Stuyvesant, marry, and try to comfort themselves in a shared gnostic fantasy based on the autobiography of an invented travel writer, and his search for a mysterious country, the Coeur, which intercedes between the pain of this world and the saving grace of the Pleroma, the place of fullness or fulfilment. The third, the narrator of the story, who never names himself, is haunted by a sense of incompleteness, and finds himself in the role of mediator when Lucas’s and Pam’s marriage falls apart under the pressure of their individual hauntings, and Pam’s various illnesses become terminal.

Like *Climbers*, *The Course of the Heart* is a celebration of quiddity, a shuffle of evocative images and detail coding the gnosis of the world; like the later Viriconium stories, it is replete with a yearning for a place more real than the world, restless, crammed with insights into the impulse towards fantasy and the extraordinary power of nostalgia for those mysterious countries (like our memories of childhood) that never were yet should have been. It is a fiction whose arc is not closure, but release.

(Paul J. McAuley)

## Grow Old, Not Up Wendy Bradley

What Townshend meant to say in “My Generation,” of course, is “hope I die before I grow up”: getting old is just chronology, nothing to be done. Growing up, however, is a state of mind that can be avoided if one sets one’s face firmly against it.

**Borderland** edited by Terri Windling and Mark Alan Arnold (Tor, \$4.99) is a book of longish short stories set in the fabulous shared world where enchantment is back, where there are cool elves with mirrorshades and where human rock-and-rollers can work magic with a gibbon. My problem with the *Borderland* world is that all the people who run away to this neutral territory where both magic and technology work intermittently are so damned young. Not every dreamer is seventeen – where are the thirtysomethings? Give me a map of the *Borderland* and I’ll be on the first train, but an unrestricted diet of the books would have you believe the whole world is inhabited by adolescents.

Nevertheless this is a very engaging collection. Two of the four stories stand out: Steven R. Boyett’s “Prodigy” is a pleasing tale of a rock-and-roll hero/wastrel whose girlfriend wants him to, no really, get a job; and when she leaves him he creates a monster of longing out of the sound of his axe on the border and has to play calm, non-testosterone acoustic to save her. Then Ellen Kushner, the author of the definitive book of *Thomas the Rhymer*, produces a perfect story on that theme, written from the viewpoint of the human daughter of *Borderland* aristocracy, revealing how she is fooled by the glamour of the elven queen.

I was a tad less taken with **Elsewhere** by Will Shetterly, a *Borderlands* novel (also published by Tor, \$3.99). This is where it starts to get a little tedious, since the disaffected teenage-viewpoint character goes through all that teen angst – missing/dead siblings, ignoring those who love him in favour of lusting after those who don’t, adopted by an armless (literally) bookshop owner and finding, and they actually mean it, the lost heir of faerie. But it’s a book on the road to nowhere because the kind of change-the-world resolution the “kid learns how life works” plot demands can’t take place when the world doesn’t belong to the writer, where there can be no structural alterations to a common habitat. On the whole the *Borderland* is a des. res. if only someone would move in.

P.M. Griffin has moved in on an Andre Norton habitat in **Redline the Stars** (Tor, \$19.95) which is credited to both but appears to have been written

by Griffin with “permission... comments, suggestions and encouragement” from Norton. This reads as though it seeks an even younger readership than the *Borderland* novels although that may simply be a function of its, well, “innocence” is the word that comes to mind. The *Solar Queen* is a trader spaceship which has been the subject of Norton’s “bestselling space opera series” and its crew this time contains a political correction in the person of its first female member, Rael Cofort. The problem with this kind of tokenism has been pointed out before (see, for example, Gwyneth Jones’ piece on writing science fiction for teenagers in Lucie Armitt’s *Where No Man Has Gone Before*, Routledge). In the kind of juvenile space opera we all read secretly in our teens we all identified with the hero. Stick a token girly into an all-male crew, though, and we have to deal with whether we identify with her or stick with the boys. Griffin doesn’t help us by making Rael Cofort enigmatic, empathic and probably telepathic too, by giving her in fact all the supposedly womanly virtues as well as a bit of a flingette with the manly captain. Personally I’d recommend readers in the target age group to move straight from Heinlein to Joanna Russ and Lois McMaster Bujold.

Yes, and now it’s Smug Bitch time. In October 1990, reviewing volume one of Weis and Hickman’s “Death Gate Cycle,” *Dragon Wing*, I doubted the demise of the only decent character, Hugh the Hand, who died in the last chapter:

“Or at least I think he does. He has already been resurrected once in the course of the volume. Even death must give way the exigencies of the Weis and Hickman plotting machine.”

So here we are in volume five and, yes, Hugh is back from the dead. Where has he been for the last three volumes? Oh, in storage – he locked himself into a cell in a monastery and drank himself into a stupor from which he recovers in nothing flat when his presence is required.

You still want to know what happens? Well OK, the dwarf characters from volume one are still in the middle of their revolution against the oppressive elves, and Haplo is having a good old angst attack on discovering that he and his kind aren’t gods after all, and there are some chaos dragons that live off fear and panic and have as god-like a relationship to Haplo as he has to the elves, dwarves and humans, and really I couldn’t give a hoot. If it weren’t for seriesism I’d stop right now but I need to know what happens next which is I guess why, however cardboard the characters and creaking the construc-



tion, this stuff will still sell by the truckload.

Finally, Antony Swithin reaches the end of his "Perilous Quest for Lyonesse" in **The Nine Gods of Safaddne** – crazy name, crazy guy! – (Fontana, £7.99). Don't despair, his hero Simon Branthwaite finds his brother and father at last and discovers the English colony on Rockall they have named Lyonesse. For once the cover art really does tell you something about the contents of the book, for the climax does indeed take place in a pair of twin castles linked together by a single-span rope bridge, and yes there are bad guys on black unicorns involved in the battle. However Swithin continues to give us copious and unnecessary information about his construct Rockall – an extra continent in mid-Atlantic with numerous lands, peoples, flora, fauna and gods – and yet at the same time to piss away the climaxes of his plot by having villains kill themselves at the first sign of opposition, armies swept away by handy avalanches and invasions thwarted by unexpected tricks of the tide. Well blimey, Tone, (you keep expecting the characters to say) that was handy!

(Wendy Bradley)

## Wit, Womanhood and Slapstick

### Chris Gilmore

It's got to be admitted – women are in general less loathsome than men, and Kipling had it all wrong: the male of the species is deadlier. Or maybe that's not it at all; "the English are noble, the English are nice" – nicer than their American counterparts, anyway.

Such would seem to be the subtext of Anne Billson's first novel, **Suckers** (Pan, £4.99), ostensibly a modern-dress vampire yarn, but principally a psychological study of the first-person anti-heroine, Dora Vale. Dora is a grade-A unmitigated bitch – pointlessly vindictive, sexually predatory, pathologically dishonest, much given to self-pity, as uncharitable in her judgments as she's mean with drinks and cigarettes, superficial to a depth that terrifies, and a borderline junkie. Her milieu is the fringe of London airhead publishing, where she poses as a "creative consultant," selling manufactured marketing statistics to any publisher gullible enough to pay for them. It's an arresting profile, which Billson builds up layer by layer in Part One of the novel, so that it takes a while to realize that Dora is basically harmless. She

doesn't actually do anything more wicked than to bombard with nuisance calls and poison-pen letters a woman who once gazumped her out of a flat.

Yet I drew an immediate parallel with *American Psycho*. The Atlantic ocean notwithstanding, her world is essentially Bateman's: a world obsessed with the dreariest aspects of fashion, and too busy updating its icons to be aware of their trashiness. Dora's no less hooked on the tinsel than everyone else she knows, but here the first of her two virtues comes to the fore: she has some genuine taste of her own – not all that good, but honestly come by. It never leaves her at a loss for a cynical wisecrack, and when she dares't voice them, she shares them all with the reader. It embarrasses her, of course. Noting (and hating) that black has become the colour, she makes a point of attending a party in a red dress, but bottles halfway out by covering it with a black jacket and as many black accessories as she can cram on.

Her other virtue is the one without which no virtue and few vices can be of much effect: Dora's moral and physical courage never fail. Whether penetrating a vampire citadel, facing down a senior vampire's chief of staff, slugging it out with crucifix and garlic in a borrowed bathrobe or coping with her own unrequited and ignoble love, Dora dives in as deep, stays down as long and comes up as muddy as the situation demands. Naturally, I fell in love with her, as I'm sure was Anne Billson's intention.

With such heavy emphasis on developing a single character the structure suffers. Virtually nothing happens in Part One, and Part Two flashes back to Dora's earlier encounters with vampire kind. In Parts Three and Four the story gets under way, as the vampires' plan to dominate the world unfolds, along with Dora's increasingly frenetic attempts, if not to stop it, at least to divert some of it to her own ends. These are not helped by her being drunk much of the time, but the vampires have problems of their own. The plan calls for the creation of an army of expendable semi-vampires, chosen from the ranks of the yuppies and media types to be found in Docklands, whose parasitic personalities make them especially suitable for conversation. They still snort coke, incidentally, and the existential effect of cutting a line on a mirror in which you cast no reflection is one of the few aspects of vampire lifestyle not to receive Dora's commentary. Incompetence on both sides rapidly raises the blood-and-guts count, reaching a bad taste nadir when Dora, cornered in a vampire wine bar, finds her period starting and the pirhanas already getting above themselves.

The press release pushes *Suckers* as a satire on yuppieism, which I suppose

it is in part, but that's the least important aspect. It's a black and bloody celebration of wit, womanhood and slapstick, beautifully sustained to a thoroughly satisfying climax. By way of a bonus, Pan has done the decent thing and brought it out in B-format at a fiver – good value in these hard times, and proves it can still be done. Pan, continue; others, copy!

My generation will never forget Poul Anderson's Dominic Flan-dry, gallant, *galant*, hard-drinking, angst-ridden bulwark of an effete empire against the ever more impudent encroachments of the insuperable Long Night; for the current generation Lois McMaster Bujold has produced Miles Vorsigan, frail and dwarfish scion of a noble line, allergic to liquor and much else besides, and morbidly conscious of his unattractive physique. The only person in **Borders of Infinity** (Pan, £4.99) who really fancies him is the hermaphrodite Bel Thorne, but as Bel fancies a female "quaddie" (no legs but four arms) even more, that does little for his confidence. The girl he actually gets is an eight-foot monster and a virgin to boot, but Miles manages; he is a man of indomitable will.

Miles's world of Barrayar has been recently devastated by atomic war, so that as well as his low stature and brittle bones, Miles must contend with anti-mutant prejudice, despite not being one himself but the victim of insult in utero. His mother was poisoned and almost killed during pregnancy, and he knows that any offspring he sires will resemble his heroic father and grandfather more than himself. He also knows that to emphasize the distinction is to give in to the prejudice, which it's part of his long-term plan to eradicate.

It sounds politically correct to a gruesome degree, yet Miles and Flan-dry would instantly recognize each other, and get on well; both are utterly committed to their feudal obligations. Yet their cases are dissimilar, in that for Flan-dry feudalism was a *pis aller*, adopted in desperation after the degeneration of more liberal and sophisticated political forms, whereas for Miles it is a temporary measure, adopted in the wake of disaster, and to be displaced by more liberal etc. forms in the near future.

The present book is a fix-up of three of Miles's adventures from *Analog* in the late 1980s. In retrospect all three plots seem somewhat contrived, but Bujold brings to them enough ingenuity and emotional commitment to carry the reader. She handles human vulnerability well, and is moreover a mistress of suspense. In the first Miles must judge a case of infanticide among his people, having due regard for the pressures working upon them; in the

second he must wrest a collection of scientific secrets plus their inventor and sundry impedimenta from a dungeon on a fleshpot world; and in the third rebuild morale among the occupants of a prison camp. The last works least well; despite Bujold's assertions to the contrary, it all seems a trifle too easy for him, and there's a notable lack of background – we're never told what the war is supposed to be about, only that Miles being the good guy is on one side, ergo the others must be the bad guys. Nonetheless, this collection is well worth the money – despite all appearances.

Pan have given the book a cheap cover illustration with no relevance to the text, and imposed thereon ugly and cluttered graphics. The book itself is printed on such cheap and nasty paper that the ink bleeds noticeably, and the design is bog standard. Bujold deserves a lot better, and at a fiver for a shortish A-format paperback, so do we.

**I**n *Achilles Choice* by Larry Niven and Steven Barnes (Pan, £8.99) the world of 2044 is run by a Council of multinational monopolies according to the principles of (allegedly) benevolent fascism. Nation states are marginalized, with most individuals preferring allegiance to one or other of the corporations. With world peace and high living standards, it's the world of *Rollerball*, and the plot is much the same as well.

The Olympics have been restructured to reflect the corporate vision of the renaissance man/woman. All contenders must offer two sports, present a thesis, and do something "esthetic," this last being, like much else in the book, rather fuzzily defined; as it includes computer graphics and chess, one wonders what else may be acceptable. The maguffin is "Boost," a form of brain-surgery which enhances all aspect of mental and physical performance, and is not only permitted but encouraged, despite the disadvantage that after a maximum of eight years the autonomic nervous system goes chaotic, leading to rapid degeneration of body and mind, followed by death.

That is the choice which our heroine, Jillian Schomer, must make – but there's an out. If she can win a gold she will be given a Link, a satellite-controlled add-on built into the skull, which regulates the nervous system much as a governor regulates the action of a defective heart. Here's where credibility starts to unravel. Given the multiplicity of channels available, and the cheapness of cybernetic hardware, there seems no reason why all the best and brightest, if not the whole population, should not be given Boost plus Link as a matter of course. Since anyone's Link could be turned off centrally, with catastrophic

consequences, I can imagine no more effective means of social control. None of this is new: Murray Leinster thought of something on these lines in *The Last Spaceship* (1949), and the question of who gets chosen and who doesn't is exactly the sort that used to exercise J.T. McIntosh.

Niven and Barnes, by contrast, not only ignore these possibilities but signally fail to come up with a motive for the Council. All right, there are intrigues going on between the corporations, but this factor should encourage them to all to maximize rather than restrict the number of Boosted/Linked among their personnel. Moreover, the sad condition of losing contenders seems to arouse no sympathy among the populace. The spectacle of a superb and beloved silver medallist falling painfully and publicly apart for lack of what she could very easily be given is precisely the sort of unnecessary focus of unrest that a rational entrenched bureaucracy would go to great lengths to avoid, but the authors ignore this very obvious aspect as well.

And that's the problem with the whole book. Too little time and effort has gone into it, arousing the suspicion that if more had it would have been written very differently or abandoned altogether. At £8.99 for C-format, you don't get much book for your buck, either. Two hundred and fourteen pages sounds respectable, but the print is large, there are seventeen chapters, each on a fresh recto, plus twelve full-page illustrations, each with a blank behind. Though it's far too short for the society to be properly portrayed, no one at Tor (the U.S. publisher) seems to have read it. Had it been read, someone might have noticed that Jillian has short blonde hair (p.9), yet in Boris Vallejo's pictures it's always halfway down her back. Don't they even shave for brain surgery any more? The pictures are in India ink, which isn't Vallejo's best medium – he's much better with soft pencil. At that, Jillian's features vary from plate to plate, and no attempt has been made to represent the acromegaly of her coach, a silver medallist now well into borrowed time.

In short, no one cares very much, and since the authors don't seem to either, perhaps they're right not to. It's all a great shame; Niven can and has done so much better, and these are not his characteristic weaknesses. The great success of *Known Space* derived as much from its self-consistency as anything, but *Achilles' Choice* looks jerry-built. Barnes deserves the full attention of his senior collaborator, but it's not been forthcoming.

(Chris Gilmore)

## Voices Prophesying War Kim Newman

**T**he 1966 first edition of *Voices Prophesying War: Future Wars 1763-3749* by I.F. Clarke (Oxford University Press, 1992, £19.95), was subtitled "1763-1984," marking the span between the anonymous *Reign of King George VI*, which apparently inaugurated the "imaginary war" sub-genre, and Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949). As is demonstrated by the new sub-title, which is extended to commemorate the date in which the world again ends in Walter M. Miller's *A Canticle for Leibowitz* (1959), this welcome new edition is greatly revised and extended. Unusually for an academic, Clarke is as aware of events within the strict category of science fiction as within the greater progress of mainstream literature – although he displays a wide historical and political spectrum of interests entirely at odds with the tunnel-vision of all too many who have commented on the genre from within. On the strength of its old version, this easily as a classic, but the new, improved edition also makes it one of the most important recent contributions to the debate that rages about the exact purpose as prophecy or current commentary of Future Fictions.

Although Clarke starts with *The Reign of King George VI: 1900-1925*, which features a 20th-century European War of 1917-1920 fought on the principles of Frederick the Great, he swiftly overleaps a century of proto-science fiction (including a wonderful rash of paranoia stories about Napoleonic invaders surging through a Channel Tunnel) to get to Sir George Tomkyns Chesney's *The Battle of Dorking: Reminiscences of a Volunteer* (1871). This truly set the pattern for what was to come and established rules and regulations for a genre still being observed as recently as Sir John Hackett's *World War Three* (1978) and Whitley Strieber and James Kunetka's *Warday* (1984), not to mention (which Clarke doesn't) John Milius's film *Red Dawn* (1984).

Concerned at the post-Crimea state of the nation's defences, Chesney, who initially published his brief novel anonymously, outlined a near future in which Germany, having swiftly crushed France in the real world, sets its sights on Britain and successfully conquers the island kingdom, besting the stout-hearted but ineptly-managed defence forces with frightening efficiency. Chesney's master-stroke was to realize that warfare was changing, and to use an imaginative framework to illustrate just what the changes would



mean. Also, for an army officer, he proved surprisingly more adept at fiction than many of his successors, and *The Battle of Dorking* became one of the most-reprinted (including a 1940 Nazi propaganda edition) and imitated works of the century.

Clarke cannily distinguishes between the various strands of follow-up to *The Battle of Dorking*, noting the patriots who refought Chesney's conflict with a happier outcome for Britain, the xenophobes who seized upon the new genre to present Britain's national foes as thoroughly verminous scum (although German and French writers did as much for the filthy British) and the real visionaries, like H.G. Wells and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, who was torn between a delight in conceiving new technologies like the tank and the submarine and a sharp awareness of just how catastrophic such weapons could be.

One among many delightful anecdotes recounted by Clarke of all this paper bloodshed is the creation by William Le Queux of *The Invasion of 1910* (1905) as a serial for Lord Harmsworth's *Daily Mail* (Harmsworth having experimented on a smaller scale with *The Siege of Portsmouth* in the *Portsmouth Mail* in 1895). Le Queux consulted highly-regarded experts and outlined a perfectly sound plan for a German invasion of Britain, only to be told by Harmsworth that "although the strategy might be faultless, it would be bad for circulation... the Germans had to pass through every sizeable town, 'not keep to remote one-eyed country villages where there was no possibility of large *Daily Mail* sales'." As Clarke notes, "the invasion plan was altered to allow ferocious Uhlans to gallop into every town from Sheffield to Chelmsford."

Clarke repeatedly refers to the literature's short-comings as prophecy, but it is hard not to see many of these works Wells's *The World Set Free* invented the term "atom bomb" in 1914) as precursors of what was to come. Nevertheless, Clarke isolates the single greatest failing of all those, like William Le Queux with his interminable tales of Anglo-French invasions and counter-insurgents, who entered the genre; no matter how extensive was the writers' knowledge of new armaments or tactics, with dirigibles and armoured vehicles and wonderful explosive materials, they failed entirely to conceive of the enormous loss of life of the First World War. The well-mannered exchanges of superior fire-power in the run of imaginary-war stories from 1871 to 1914 seem like mere skirmishes when stacked against the appalling bloodshed of a war in which tactics actually consisted not of duels between secret weapon-brandishing heroes but in the simple throwing of

thousands of dispensable men at each other.

"There can be no doubt," Clarke writes, "that the authors of many tales of future warfare shared in the responsibility for the catastrophe that overtook Europe... the best that can be said of them is that they often stood for high patriotic ideals at a time when few had realized how technological innovations would totally transform the nature of modern warfare. Their stories represent the last stage in the brief honeymoon between science and humanity, before military technologies of poison gas, barbed wire and tanks had shown what could be done with war, given the science to do it. At their worst, they perpetuated an archaic attitude to war by helping to maintain the belief that another war would not cause any profound changes in the state of the world."

After giving proper attention to the inter-war rash of embittered or hysterical visions, Clarke pays close attention to the atomic fictions common since 1945, noting the heavy concentration on post-apocalypse adventuring at the expense of actual consideration of the brief nuclear wars that bring about the worlds of action-oriented fantasies like the "Doomsday Warrior" (1984-) series or despairing literature like Huxley's *Ape and Essence* (1949). If there is an omission, it is that Clarke barely mentions the category of "alternate-world" story, in which actual wars are reimagined with different outcomes (which dates as far back as Louis Geoffroy's *Napoleon Apocryphe* of 1841, in which Bonaparte wins), although World War Two, in particular, has been refought with different outcomes endlessly, many times in precisely the spirit of *The Battle of Dorking*, as in the film *It Happened Here* (1966). In addition to the wry and wise text, Clarke has compiled a probably definitive and invaluable bibliography of his subject.

In a world changing so fast that there is already something quaint about the Cold War nightmares of *Warday*, the imaginary war genre is liable to make something of a comeback, perhaps in the guise of the "techno-thriller" as authors wish, like their 19th-century predecessors, to experiment in fiction with gleaming hardware one hopes is rarely used in actuality. Since the recession of the superpower conflict and its attendant nuclear threat has cleared the way for a resumption of the practice of "conventional" warfare, we can perhaps look forward in the near future to stories set in the Middle East, the former Soviet Union or other potential trouble spots as the vagaries of politics and weapons technology open up the possibilities of new nightmares, new story-ideas and new casualties.

(Kim Newman)

## The Matter Myth

### Chris Gilmore

**The Matter Myth: Beyond Chaos and Complexity** by Paul Davies and John Gribbin (Penguin, £6.99) is one of those books wherein physicists set forth for intelligent lay people some scraps of the grandeur and glory which is their daily fare. The banquets are well attended, most notably when Stephen Hawking issues the invitations, but having attended several such functions one begins to note that the menu is limited. The reason is twofold. First, the books are written to inform non-scientists (and scientists in unrelated disciplines) of the exciting developments at the leading edge of the field, but as the field is esoteric, background must be provided. Background means historical accounts of cosmology (for the expansion of space), special relativity (for the dilation of spacetime), general relativity (for black holes), chaos theory (for the self-organizing aspect of the Universe), quantum theory (for super-symmetry) and grand unified theories (because that's where the action is all leading). Secondly, because the writers are more concerned with clarity than originality, they treat each other's metaphors as public domain. At some point adjacent to Young's two-slit experiment Schrödinger's cat is trotted out, as are the pirouetting ice-dancer (to illustrate conservation of angular momentum) and the balloon analogy (to illustrate the red shift). Only once all these have appeared can anything new be introduced.

This general similarity makes them harder, rather than easier to review. It's easy enough to note what's new (not a lot, usually; science is incremental, but to the writing of books there is no end). It's also easy to note that this account of Hubble's logic is vivid and well organized, or that account of Alain Aspect's famous experiment illustrates the paradox of non-locality well (or badly), but the scholarly standards relevant in other fields have no force here. An historical or biographical work may be hailed as the standard reference for the next century, or even all time; a new economic theory will be judged by its geopolitical effects when practised. Books of this sort are certain to be looking dated within a decade, more often in half that time. Moreover, their influence is zero: quite apart from the vexed question of how many buyers actually read the later chapters of *A Brief History of Time*, serious theoretical physicists don't bother with them; they keep up (and occasionally slug it out) with each other in the pages of *Nature* and *Science*.

Thus the needs of the general reader/

potential buyer resemble those of someone buying a novel or a textbook less than those of someone replacing a consumer durable. He doesn't want a review so much as a *Which?* report. On the basis of admittedly patchy reading, mine goes like this:

**The Matter Myth.** A cheap and cheerful item of limited life-expectancy, but with a good range of basic features. It contains little unfamiliar material, though the passages on the fundamental nature of quantum wormholes and the quantum argument in favour of the Big Crunch against the Open Universe were new to me. In Davies's exposition the "inflationary" phase of Big Bang theory looks less ad hoc than usual, and "renormalization" of quantum equations less disreputable. Perhaps the troubled ghost of Paul Dirac can now rest easier. If you have *The Arrow of Time* (Peter Coveney and Roger Highfield) or *Unravelling the Mind of God* (Robert Matthews) it's probably not worth trading in yet. If you have *A Brief History of Time*, you may well find it a useful accessory. If you have nothing later than *Coming of Age in the Milky Way* (Tim Ferris) it may be worth getting as a stop-gap before your next big buy. If your principal interest is in chaos theory, you would do better to buy James Gleick's *Chaos* and/or Davies's own *The Cosmic Blueprint*; if it in quantum theory, *The Cosmic Code* (Heinz Pagels) will serve you better, as will Davies's own *The Mind of God* if you are more inclined towards cosmology. And if you've read nothing later than George Gamow's *Mr Tompkins* books, it's just what you need to find your bearings.

(Chris Gilmore)

## UK Books Received January 1993

The following is a list of all sf, fantasy and horror titles, and books of related interest, received by Interzone during the month specified above. Official publication dates, where known, are given in italics at the end of each entry. Descriptive phrases in quotes following titles are taken from book covers rather than title pages. A listing here does not preclude a separate review in this issue (or in a future issue) of the magazine.

Anthony, Piers. **Mercycle.** Grafton, ISBN 0-586 21451-8, 343pp, paperback, £4.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1991.) 25th January 1993.

Asimov, Isaac. **The Complete Stories, Volume 1.** HarperCollins, ISBN 0-00-224139 0, 614pp, hardcover, £15.99. (Sf collection, first published in the USA, 1990; it contains the entire contents of the slimmer volumes *Earth is Room Enough* [1957], *Nine Tomorrow's* [1959] and *Nightfall and Other Stories* [1969]; there's a good deal of prime Asimov here.) 1st March 1993.

Asimov, Isaac. **Forward the Foundation.** Doubleday, ISBN 0385-269420, 417pp, hardcover, £14.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1993; proof copy received; the final title in the "Foundation" series and, presumably, Asimov's last novel.) 22nd April 1993.

Auchincloss, Louis. **False Gods.** Constable, ISBN 0-09-471980-2, 214pp, hardcover, £14.99. (Short-story collection, first published in the USA [?], 1993; described as an "elegant sequence of fables," this book employs Greek myth in contemporary settings; it's probably not fantasy in the proper sense, but may be of interest to some of our readers: Auchincloss is a distinguished American lawyer and novelist who seems to have been around the New York literary scene for as long as anyone can remember.) 22nd February 1993.

Bear, Greg. **Anvil of Stars.** Arrow/Legend, ISBN 0-09-978040-2, 499pp, paperback, £4.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1992; sequel to *The Forge of God*; reviewed by Mary Gentle in *Interzone* 60.) 18th February 1993.

Bemman, Hans. **The Broken Goddess.** Translated by Anthea Bell. Penguin, ISBN 0-14-016585-1, 234pp, paperback, £5.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in Germany, 1990; by the author [born 1922] of the fantasy blockbuster *The Stone and the Flute* [1983; trans. 1987].) January 1993.

Card, Orson Scott. **The Call of Earth.** "Homecoming: Volume Two." Legend, ISBN 0-09-926011-5, 304pp, trade paperback, £8.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1993; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen].) 18th February 1993.

Card, Orson Scott. **The Memory of Earth.** "Volume One of Homecoming." Arrow Legend, ISBN 0-09-919961-0, 294pp, paperback, £4.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1992; reviewed by Paul McAuley in *Interzone* 59.) 18th February 1993.

Chadbourne, Mark. **Underground.** Platkus, ISBN 0-7499-0164-0, 247pp, hardcover, £13.99. (Horror novel, first edition; proof copy received; a debut book by a new British writer, the accompanying publicity letter describes it as "the first socialist horror novel" [tell that to Ian Watson].) 11th February 1993.

Collins, Warwick. **Death of an Angel.** Pan, ISBN 0-330-32135-8, 418pp, paperback, £4.99. (Near-future political-cum-yachting thriller, first published in 1992; third in the trilogy which began with *Challenge* and *New World*.) 12th February 1993.

Constantine, Storm. **Sign for the Sacred.** Headline, ISBN 0-7472-7908-X, 373pp, trade paperback, £8.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; this is possibly a sequel to her last novel, *Burying the Shadow*, but, if so, the publishers have done their best to conceal the fact.) 11th February 1993.

Disch, Thomas M. **The M.D.: A Horror Story.** Grafton, ISBN 0-586-07284-5, 541pp, paperback, £5.99. (Horror novel, first published in the USA, 1991; justly praised by Dean Koontz, Stephen King, Professor Tom Shippey and all, it's one of the masterpieces of recent years; reviewed by Mary Gentle in *Interzone* 60.) 8th February 1993.

Donnelly, Joe. **Bane.** Arrow, ISBN 0-09-910300-9, 461pp, paperback, £4.99. (Horror novel, first published in 1989.) 7th January 1993.

Donnelly, Joe. **The Shee.** Arrow, ISBN 0-09-910471-7, 520pp, paperback, £4.99. (Horror novel, first published in 1992.) 7th January 1993.

Eca De Queiroz, [Jose Maria]. **The Mandarin (and Other Stories).** Translated by Margaret Jull Costa. Afterword by Robert Webb. Dedalus, ISBN 0-946626-98-7, 125pp, paperback, £6.99. (Fantasy collection, first edition; originally published in Portuguese, 1880-1897; it contains a short novel and two other tales by an author [1845-1900] who is "considered to be Portugal's greatest nineteenth century novelist.") 17th February 1993.

Eddings, David. **Domes of Fire: The Tamuli, Book One.** Grafton, ISBN 0-586-21858-0, 470pp, trade paperback, £8.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1992; the beginning of a new trilogy which follows on from the events of "The Elenium.") 8th February 1993.

Gallagher, J.V. **Gameworld.** Headline, ISBN 0-7472-3978-9, 374pp, paperback, £4.99. (Humorous fantasy novel, first edition; this is a first fantasy work by a writer who "has written several novels under a variety of pseudonyms"; the name given on the copyright statement is Simon Fowler.) 18th February 1993.

Gallagher, Stephen. **Follower.** Hodder/NEL, ISBN 0-450-54062-6, 325pp, paperback, £4.99. (Horror novel, first published in 1984.) 28th January 1993.

Gibbons, Dave, Steve Rude, Karl Kesel and Steve Oliff. **World's Finest.** "Superman/Batman." Titan, ISBN 1-85286-438-9, pages unnumbered [circa 160pp], trade paperback, £8.99. (Sf/fantasy graphic novel; first edition; originally published in parts in the USA by DC Comics, 1990.) 28th January 1993.

Hamilton, Peter F. **Mindstar Rising.** Pan, ISBN 0-330-32376-8, 438pp, paperback, £4.99. (Sf novel, first edition; a debut book by a new British writer.) 12th March 1993.

Hubbard, L. Ron. **Disaster: Mission Earth, Volume Eight.** New Era, ISBN 1-870451-14-7, 363pp, paperback, £4.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1987; this is the American [Bridge Publications] softcover edition with a British price sticker; New Era have been very hit-and-miss about sending us their paperback releases of the novels in this ten-volume series, but we can't honestly say we're sorry.) 21st January 1993.

Irwin, Robert. **The Limits of Vision.** Dedalus, ISBN 1-873982-10-0, 120pp, paperback, £5.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in 1986; this was Irwin's second book, after the highly praised *The Arabian Nightmare*; reviewed by John Clute in *Interzone* 16.) 11th February 1993.

James, William. **The Earth is the Lord's: The Sunfall Trilogy, Book One.** Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-084-1, 535pp, paperback, £5.99. (Sf novel, first edition; this is a pseudonymous debut book by a Scottish novelist in his early 40s, a former "soldier, business executive and academic.") 25th February 1993.

Jones, Jenny. **Lies and Flames: Volume Three of Flight Over Fire.** Headline, ISBN 0-7472-3876-6, 560pp, paperback, £5.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in 1992; reviewed by Mary Gentle in *Interzone* 67.) 21st January 1993.

Jones, Liane. **The Dreamstone.** Mandarin, ISBN 0-7493-1206-8, 488pp, paperback, £4.99. (Timeslip fantasy novel, first published in 1992; this is one of those points at which mutually uncomprehending genre-spheres meet: of course, the title has been used before, by C.J. Cherryh in 1983 [sigh], but this debut book by a Welsh author won the £10,000 Betty Trask Prize for best romantic novel of 1992; Celia Brayfield describes it as "one of the most enthralling books of its kind I have ever read" and *Today* thinks it is "little short of



brilliant"; have any sf/fantasy readers even heard of it?) 28th January 1993.

Jones, Stephen. **The Illustrated Vampire Movie Guide.** Introduction by Peter Cushing. Titan, ISBN 1-85286-449-4, 144pp, trade paperback, £9.99. (Guide to horror films, first edition; a well-timed and apparently comprehensive illustrated listing of all the bloodsucker movies ever made.) 29th January 1992.

Keith, William H., Jr. **The Price of Glory.** "Battletech." Penguin/Roc, ISBN 0-14-017551-2, 370pp, paperback, £4.99. (Shared-world sf novel, first published in the USA, 1993.) February 1993

Kilworth, Garry. **In the Country of Tattooed Men.** Grafton, ISBN 0-586-21498-4, 224pp, paperback, £5.99. (Sf/fantasy collection, first edition; it contains a short introduction and 18 admirably various stories reprinted from Asimov's, BBR, F&SF, Fantasy Tales, Interzone, Omni, Other Edens, Zenith and elsewhere; recommended.) 8th February 1993.

King, Stephen. **Dolores Claiborne.** Hodder & Stoughton, ISBN 0-340-54672-7, 241pp, hardcover, £14.99. (Horror/suspense novel, first published in the USA, 1992; did you ever hear a modern title which sounds so much like that of a Victorian or Edwardian novel?; but it's also a surprisingly short book for King, about the length of his first, Carrie.) 4th February 1993.

Lee, Tanith. **Dark Dance.** "First in the Blood Opera Sequence." Warner, ISBN 0-7515-0086-0, 409pp, paperback, £4.99. (Horror/fantasy novel, first published in 1992; reviewed by John Clute in Interzone 59.) 11th February 1993.

McCaffrey, Anne. **Damia.** Corgi, ISBN 0-552-13764-2, 380pp, paperback, £4.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1992; sequel to *The Rowan*.) 11th February 1993.

McCaffrey, Anne. **Damia's Children.** Bantam Press, ISBN 0-593-02650-0, 264pp, hardcover, £14.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1992; sequel to *Damia*.) 11th February 1993.

Martin, David. **Bring Me Children.** Headline, ISBN 0-7472-3822-7, 373pp, paperback, £4.99. (Horror/suspense novel, first published in the USA, 1992.) 21st January 1993.

Matthews, Robert. **Unravelling the Mind of God: Mysteries at the Frontier of Science.** Virgin, ISBN 0-86369-671-6, x+274pp, paperback, £5.99. (Popular science text, first published in 1992; the author is a science journalist for the *Economist*, *Sunday Telegraph*, etc.) 18th February 1993.

Moorcock, Michael. **Casablanca.** Gollancz/VGSF, ISBN 0-575-05445-X, 267pp, paperback, £4.99. (Sf/fantasy/non-fiction collection, first published in 1989; the longest story, "Gold Diggers of 1977," is a revision of Moorcock's Sex Pistols movie tie-in "novelization" *The Great Rock'n'Roll Swindle* [1980].) 4th February 1993.

O'Neill, Dennis, Edward Hannigan and John Beatty. **Batman: Shaman.** Titan, ISBN 1-85286-435-4, pages unnumbered [circa 128pp], trade paperback, £7.99. (Sf/fantasy graphic novel; first edition; originally published in parts in the USA by DC Comics as *Legends of the Dark Knight*, 1989-90.) 18th February 1993.

Reeves-Stevens, Garfield. **Bloodshift.** Pan, ISBN 0-330-32152-8, 276pp, paperback, £4.99. (Horror novel, first published in the USA, 1981; this was its author's debut book; according to an out-of-date biographical note in the back, he lives in Toronto and is also the author of *Dreamland*, 1986, *Children of the Shroud*, 1987, and the "forth-

coming" *Nighteyes*, 1988.) 12th February 1993.

Reichert, Mickey Zucker. **The Last of the Renshai.** "A new fantasy epic begins..." Orion/Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-069-7, 533pp, trade paperback, £8.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1992; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen].) 11th February 1993.

Rickman, Phil. **Candlelight.** Pan, ISBN 0-330-32520-5, 429pp, paperback, £4.99. (Horror novel, first published in 1991; by a BBC reporter resident in Wales, this was its author's debut book, praised by people like George MacBeth and Ruth Rendell.) 26th February 1993.

Rickman, Phil. **Crybbe.** Macmillan London, ISBN 0-333-59158-5, 664pp, hardcover, £14.99. (Horror novel, first edition; it seems to contain allusions to that favourite figure of fantasy fiction, Dr John Dee.) 26th February 1993.

Roberts, Gareth. **The Highest Science.** "The New Doctor Who Adventures." Virgin/Doctor Who, ISBN 0-426-20377-1, 258pp, paperback, £3.99. (Shared-universe sf novel, first edition.) 18th February 1993.

Sargent, Carl, and Marc Gascoigne. **Streets of Blood. Shadowrun: Secrets of Power, Volume 8.** Penguin/Roc, ISBN 0-14-017545-8, 278pp, paperback, £4.99. (Shared-world sf/fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1992.) February 1993.

Sargent, Pamela. **Ruler of the Sky.** Chatto & Windus, ISBN 0-7011-3322-8, 710pp, trade paperback, £10.99. (Historical novel by a well-known sf writer, first edition [?]; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen]; it's about Genghis Khan, and the publishers are angling it towards "the millions who enjoyed Jean Auel's *Clan of the Cave Bear*."") 18th January 1993

Simmons, Dan. **Children of the Night.** Headline, ISBN 0-7472-3899-5, 408pp, paperback, £4.99. (Horror novel, first published in the USA, 1992; reviewed by Chris Gilmore in Interzone 64.) 1st February 1993.

Spufford, Francis, ed. **The Chatto Book of the Devil, with an Introduction by Himself.** Chatto & Windus, ISBN 0-7011-5413-6, 390pp, hardcover, £15.99. (Horror anthology, first edition; actually, it's really more of a commonplace book, with scores of short extracts from literature throughout the ages; authors ransacked include Marlowe, Milton, Defoe, Blake, Maturin, Dostoevsky, Marie Corelli and Mark Twain.) 1st February 1993.

Stableford, Brian. **The Angel of Pain.** Pan, ISBN 0-330-32607-4, 396pp, paperback, £4.99. (Fantasy/horror/metaphysical sf novel, first published in 1991; sequel to *The Werewolves of London*; reviewed by John Clute in Interzone 53.) 12th February 1993.

Stoker, Bram. **Dracula.** Edited by Maurice Hindle. "Penguin Classics." Penguin, ISBN 0-14-043381-3, 520pp, paperback, £4.99. (Horror novel, first published in 1897; it was also reissued by Pan Books just a month earlier, but this, which is available at the same price, is an annotated edition with a good introduction; recommended.) January 1993.

Swanwick, Michael. **Stations of the Tide.** Arrow/Legend, ISBN 0-09-998510-1, 252pp, paperback, £4.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1991; winner of the Nebula Award as best sf novel; reviewed by Chris Gilmore in Interzone 61.) 18th February 1993.

Swithin, Antony. **The Nine Gods of Safaddne: The Perilous Quest for Lyonesse, Book Four.** Fontana, ISBN 0-00-617941-X,

xiv+270pp, trade paperback, £7.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition.) 25th January 1993.

Thomas, Roy, Mike Mignola and John Nyberg. **Bram Stoker's Dracula.** Based on the screenplay by James V. Hart. Titan, ISBN 1-85286-474-5, pages unnumbered [circa 120pp], trade paperback, £7.99. (Graphic novelization of the Coppola horror movie inspired by Stoker's novel; first edition.) 11th February 1993.

Tremayne, Peter. **Dracula Lives!** Penguin/Signet, ISBN 0-45-117599-9, 662pp, paperback, £4.99. (Horror omnibus, first edition; it contains the three novels *Dracula Unborn* [1977], *The Revenge of Dracula* [1978] and *Dracula, My Love* [1980], all sequels by another hand to Bram Stoker's *Dracula*; "Peter Tremayne" is a pseudonym for Peter Berresford Ellis.) January 1993.

Wiltse, David. **Prayer for the Dead.** Grafton, ISBN 0-586-21472-0, 304pp, paperback, £4.99. (Horror/suspense novel, first published in the USA, 1991; the author is an American playwright who has also written four previous novels – *Home Again*, *The Fifth Angel*, *The Serpent* and *The Wedding Guest* – and he has been described as "the absolute master of psychological suspense.") 25th January 1993.

Webber, Collin. **Merlin and the Last Trump.** "Semi-Finalist in the BBC Radio 4 Bookshelf/Gollancz First Fantasy Competition." Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-05534-0, 269pp, hardcover, £14.99. (Humorous fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received.) April 1993.

Womack, Jack. **Elvissey.** HarperCollins, ISBN 0-246-13839-4, 319pp, hardcover, £15.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1993.) 18th February 1993.

Wright, T.M. **Goodlow's Ghosts.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-05511-1, 215pp, hardcover, £14.99. (Horror novel, first edition [?]; proof copy received.) May 1993.

Wright, T.M. **Little Boy Lost.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-05026-8, 247pp, paperback, £3.99. (Horror novel, first published in the USA, 1992.) 4th February 1993.

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## Overseas Books Received

Bova, Ben. **Challenges.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-85550-8, 350pp, hardcover, \$21.95. (Sf collection, first edition; proof copy received; as well as stories, it also contains a substantial amount of non-fiction, including essays such as "John Campbell and the Modern SF Idiom" [1986] and "Science in Science Fiction" [1990].) May 1993.

Bretnor, Reginald. **Of Force and Violence and Other Imponderables: Essays on War, Politics, and Government.** Edited by Paul David Seldis. "Stokvis Studies in Historical Chronology and Thought, Number 6." Borgo Press [PO Box 2845, San Bernardino, CA 92406, USA], ISBN 0-89370-421-0, 144pp, trade paperback, \$15. (Essay collection by a recently deceased American sf author; first edition; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen]; some of these pieces on matters hard-nosed and militaristic first appeared in *Analog*, *Libertarian Review* and other publications; the series editor is the indefatigable Michael Burgess [aka "Robert Reginald"], and other titles already published [but not seen by us] include such choice items as *Tempest in a Teapot: The Falkland Islands War* by R. Reginald and Jeffrey M. Elliot.) Late entry: December [?] 1992 publication, received in January 1993.

Campbell, Ramsey. **Alone With the Horrors: The Great Short Fiction of Ramsey Campbell, 1961-1991.** Illustrated by J.K.



Potter. Arkham House, ISBN 0-87054-165-X, 515pp, hardcover, \$26.95. (Horror collection, first edition; containing 39 stories by a distinguished author of the macabre and weird, it's essentially an expansion of his previous British compendium *Dark Feasts* [Robinson, 1987]; we ought to sing the praises of Arkham House more often: they really are the most extraordinary small press in the world, whose unfailingly beautiful books have been appearing a couple of times a year for over 50 years now; founded by the late August Derleth, edited for the past 20-odd years by James Turner, Arkham is an American house but they've done a great deal for British writers.) 26th February 1993.

Engh, M.J. *Rainbow Man*. Tor, ISBN 0-312-85468-4, 253pp, hardcover, \$17.95. (sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; Mary Engh's first novel, Arslan [published in Britain as *A Wind from Bukhara*], was outstanding; her long-awaited second, *Wheel of the Winds*, was generally reckoned a disappointment; which way will her third one fall?; let's await the review.) May 1993.

Harbottle, Philip, and Stephen Holland. *Cultures of the Void: A History of British Science Fiction Publishing, 1946-1956*. "I.O. Evans Studies in the Philosophy and Criticism of Literature, Number 13." Borgo Press [PO Box 2845, San Bernardino, CA 92406, USA], ISBN 0-89370-415-6, 128pp, trade paperback, \$15. (Popular-fiction history, first edition; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen]; it's an account of the "unspeakable" years of English sf, with an emphasis on the many cheap paperback lines of the day; valuable as a record of an under-explored area, it's written by two well-known British pulp-fiction enthusiasts in a style commensurate with its subject matter; the series editor is the indefatigable "Robert Reginald" [Michael Burgess], and other titles already published [but not seen by us] include such items as *The Pulp Western: A Popular History of the Western Fiction Magazine in America* by John A. Dinan.) Late entry: December 1992 publication, received in January 1993.

Lafferty, R.A. *Argo: More Than Melchisedech*. Afterword by the author. Illustrated by R. Ward Shipman. U.M. Press [Box 390, Sta. A., Weston, Ont. M9N 3N1, Canada], ISBN 0-921322-34-8, pages unnumbered [circa 200pp], hardcover, \$19.95. (Sf/fantasy novel, first edition; there is a simultaneous signed limited edition [not seen]; this is described in the accompanying publicity letter as the "climax of Lafferty's Argo Mythos which also includes the Nebula nominated *Devil is Dead* and *Archipelago*." Late entry: December 1992 publication, received in January 1993.

Lafferty, R.A. *Iron Tears*. Introduction by Michael Swanwick. Edgewood Press [PO Box 264, Cambridge, MA 02238, USA], ISBN 0-9629066-2-X, 219pp, trade paperback, \$10.00 [plus \$5 for overseas postage]. (Sf/fantasy collection, first edition; 15 stories, mainly first published in magazines and original anthologies during the 1970s and 80s; this solid new collection and the above novel prove that the Lafferty industry remains vigorous; it's heartening to see there are so many small presses eager to publish an author so resolutely "uncommercial.") Late entry: December 1992 publication, received in January 1993.

Scott, Melissa. *Burning Bright*. Tor, ISBN 0-312-85502-8, 345pp, hardcover, \$21.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received.) May 1993.

Simak, Clifford D. *The Goblin Reservation*. "Masters of Science Fiction." Carroll & Graf, ISBN 0-88184-897-2, 192pp, paperback,

\$3.95. (Sf/fantasy novel, first published in 1968; not one of Simak's greatest, but an enjoyable romp.) 16th February 1993.

Vegetti, Ernesto, and Piergiorgio Nicolazzini, eds. *Fantascienza, Fantasy & Horror in Italia, 1990*. World SF/Italian Section [c/o Piergiorgio Nicolazzini, G.B. Moroni, 22, 20146 Milano, Italy], no ISBN shown, iv+137pp, paperback, £10 [US\$15] plus £1.50 [\$2] overseas postage. (Bibliography of sf and related genre works published in Italy, first edition; an accompanying letter describes it as "the first instalment of a projected series of annual compilations"; quite professionally produced, it's a worthy first stab at what librarians like to call "bibliographical control" of its subject, but it could have done with an overall author index so that one could look up short-story appearances by various writers in various anthologies.) No date shown: probably a 1992 publication, received in January 1993.

Wolfe, Gene. *Young Wolfe: A Collection of Early Stories*. Illustrated by R. Ward Shipman. U.M. Press [Box 390, Sta. A., Weston, Ont. M9N 3N1, Canada], ISBN 0-921322-32-1, 69pp, hardcover, \$15.95. (Sf/fantasy collection, first edition; there is a simultaneous signed limited edition priced at \$40 [not seen]; it contains nine stories, none of them previously collected [Wolfe's bottom drawer seems to be, er, bottomless]; two of them appeared in a student magazine as early as 1951; the others date from the 1960s and include his first fully professional sale, "The Dead Man" [Sir! magazine, October 1965], as well as two stories which were never published at all; this volume is obviously a must for Wolfe completists.) Late entry: December 1992 publication, received in January 1993.

Yarbro, Chelsea Quinn. *Darker Jewels*. Tor, ISBN 0-312-85196-7, 398pp, hardcover, \$19.95. (Horror/fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; it's yet another in the long-running "Count Saint-Germain" series of historical vampire tales; this time he's at the court of Ivan the Terrible.) April 1993.

## Interaction

### Continued from page 5

Thanks for an entertaining sf magazine. I did buy *Fantasy & Science Fiction* for a couple of years, but it didn't have the edge that *Interzone* has. Here are my opinions on the best of the year, slightly short due to my starting at issue 57. The fiction is mostly good, with some total rubbish. The best of the year without doubt was "The Sculptor" by Garry Kilworth, the brightest star in my galaxy. Julian Flood's "The Jade Pool" was another brilliant effort, closely followed by "Mothmusic" by Sarah Ash—two newcomers with a streak of amazing talent in them. Honourable mentions to "Tom Joad" and "Cyril the Cyberpig." Although not a proper short story, Kim Stanley Robinson's "Red Mars" got my appetite going for more of him. I've since read *The Gold Coast* and *The Wild Shore*. I don't know why I missed out on him this long. A definite grand master of the future. — **Paul Hanson**, Scunthorpe.

A good year's subscription, with number 63 being something of an ideal issue. Generally speaking, the quality of the stories published has become superb. Even of the stories I've listed as dislikes I concede they mostly deserved to be seen. The only exception is the terrible Charles Sheffield story, a particular disappointment as I've enjoyed his early novels. Keep 'em coming. — **John Feetenby**, Aberdeen.

The standard of stories over the year has been in general as good as ever, and a couple of issues were really outstanding. However, the bad news is that issue 65 was a real turkey for fiction: I'm so sick of the USSA stories that I skipped straight over "Tom Joad" (Newman/Byrne); the nadir of the year, however, has to be "Horse Meat" (Aldiss). — **Andy Hogbin**, Camberley, Surrey.

There are two stories which stood out above the others: "Horse Meat" which was wonderfully bleak and disgusting (it is great that a writer of Brian Aldiss's experience can still shock and provoke thought) and Julian Flood's "The Jade Pool," which was, by a short head, my favourite of the year. — **Peter Allen**, Birmingham.

Not a vintage year, I thought, but plenty worthwhile in every issue. "Tom Joad" came top of my own list, a pleasing surprise as previously I was not much taken with "alternative history." With recession still pinching and pushing so many to the wall, I'm delighted that *IZ* continues to arrive regularly each month full of stimulating fiction, news and opinions. — **Lannah Battley**, Dyfed, Wales.

## Editor's Notes

Nick Lowe (film reviews) is resting this month, but should be back next issue.

Meanwhile, Wendy Bradley will be taking a break from her TV reviews, and this month's column is her last for a while.

Next issue, we're hoping to run a surprise non-fiction feature by J.G. Ballard.



Top stories: "Tom Joad" (love that USSA stuff); "Horse Meat" (caught me out there, Brian); "Epsilon Dreams" (Eric strikes again); "The Coming of Vertumnus" (this one still haunts me). Top non-fiction: "Ansible Link" (the eagerly awaited). And even though I have no idea what John Clute is going on about, I'm an avid reader of his book-review column. — **Paul Hood**, Tiptree, Essex.

By all means indulge Newman & Byrne's love for their imaginary timeline, but please don't do it in the pages of *Interzone* any more. It's a real shame too, because the authors' other stories are of a much higher standard, as demonstrated by the hugely enjoyable "Cyril the Cyberpig" in *IZ* 66. — **Steve Wiles**, Witham, Essex.

I have enjoyed more of the stories in this year's *IZ* than ever before. It was good to see that Kim Newman and Eugene Byrne finally managed to write a decent story set in the USSA, and it was pleasing to find it as exciting as I did. Even those stories that I felt were worth mentioning as being not to my taste were better than those published in previous years — all, that is, except "Horse Meat." I really despised both you and Brian Aldiss for springing this nightmare upon me. I hated Brian more for writing it so well, and in truth it is the most well crafted piece of pornography I have ever read. — **David Smith**, Grays, Essex.

The "Horse Meat" controversy: as usual, some people have failed to take into account the difference between a disgusting, evil action described in its moral context, and such an action described merely in order to titillate the reader. I suppose this was to be expected. As for me, I think "Horse Meat" is the best thing to come from Mr Aldiss since the 1970s; I hope he will not be put off by the idiots and will continue to produce work of this standard. — **P.J.L. Hinder**, Bristol.

Brian Aldiss should be damned, or get help, for his contribution. But the person or committee that published his effort should be given the one choice: they should be damned. And you know what you can do with my subscription. — **J. McDonald**, no address given.

Now we've had the gruelling lesson from the best sf writer alive in Mr Aldiss's "Horse Meat," which got so near to realistic depiction of the true decadence of humanity under the influence of dehumanizing thought-processes and the society they give rise to, but which fell at the last hurdle trying to concentrate too many almost cute details of coincidence and drawingroom sentimentality into the

final horrific but finally horrifically-contrived ending...now that we've had the lesson, with subsequent credits to Amnesty International, whose reports need no artifice to enthrall the horrified imagination, can we steer the material of *Interzone* clearly out of the splatter-horror realms please? — **Syd Foster**, Swansea.

Best stories: "Horse Meat" (Aldiss), "Built on Blood" (Storm Constantine), "Testimony" (William F. Temple), "Britworld" (James Lovegrove). How about more stories which give optimistic solutions to the problems in all those bleak futures? — **Pete Adams**, no address given.

Winner, by a snout, of the best short story of 1992 was "Cyril the Cyberpig" by Eugene Byrne. It was witty, original, inventive and well-plotted. Most importantly, it was a perfectly believable near-future scenario despite the slightly whimsical feel: we only have to look at listings of our television programmes to see the trends in mass entertainments and recognize Cyril's society as being one possible result of them. Other good pieces of fiction include Kim Newman's "SQPR," which had a similar theme and feel to "Cyril the Cyberpig" but didn't quite reach the same dizzying heights. — **M. Heard**, Nottingham.

I consider *IZ* the best sf magazine published. What sets your magazine apart from others is the interesting and varied non-fiction. I am also impressed by the range of fiction — from experimental to traditional, and from fantasy to hard sf. Your ability to "discover" new writers is also impressive. I am particularly impressed by Greg Egan, Ian MacLeod and Nicholas Royle. I consider the U.S. subscription price very reasonable, and more than justified by the quality of the writing. — **Richard Marshall**, Rock Island, Illinois.

Let us thank you for having provided a year of enthralling fiction. We really enjoyed it very much. Even if we truly like hard science-fiction stories, we particularly appreciated the special fantasy issue (*IZ* 60). — **Ann & Prene**, Rhode Saint Genese, Belgium.

It's not that I'm against fantasy. Kilworth's "The Sculptor" was excellent, and Robert Irwin's good piece in issue 58 was clearly more fantasy than sf. But, Kilworth aside, the stories in the fantasy number seemed so short of interesting ideas, so happy to regurgitate the same tired formulae, I closed the issue feeling seriously depressed. Every time I read the word "elf" in future, I'll reach for my gun. — **Tim Lees**, Manchester.

Best fiction: Newman/Byrne, "Tom Joad." Best non-fiction: Brian Stable-

ford, "Adolf Hitler. His Part in Our Struggle." Best cover: Mark Harrison, November. Best illustrator: Martin McKenna. — **Olaf Bultmann**, Bielefeld, Germany.

I have been subscribing to your magazine for around three years, and have not yet written to tell you how much I look forward to it poking its face through the letterbox each month. The Bob Shaw special issue, in particular, was excellent. I am not a well-read sf fan, and the main reason I buy the magazine is to find out about new (to me) authors. I thank you for introducing me to Dan Simmons, Robert Holdstock, Stephen Baxter and, now, Bob Shaw. — **David Hedges**, Morden, Surrey.

The Bob Shaw special: I do realize that it's good publicity for you to do this kind of thing from time to time, but why not pick a less established but still "known" writer — e.g. Greg Egan or Eric Brown. They probably need the publicity more than Mr Shaw does, and, generally speaking, they write better stories. — **P.J.L. Hinder**, Bristol.

Issue 67 is by far one of the best I have read. I loved the story by Bob Shaw, "Time to Kill." I think it will be on the Best Of list for 1993. "Gravity Brothers" by Stephen Blanchard was excellent, as was "Pilgrim 7" by Stephen Baxter. "The Dead" by Harrison and Ings I couldn't get into. **D.G. Plaiter**, Southsea, Hants.

I think you are doing a very commendable job: you have yet to publish anything I consider "duff," but some stories are better than others. I have particularly enjoyed the Molly Brown offerings. I'm afraid "Ansible Link" loses me, but then I'm only a recent subscriber (introduced via the *New Scientist* mail shot). — **K.J. Shotton**, Stoke-on-Trent.

I've been reading your magazine since the first issue and I've been pleased to see it becoming progressively stronger. Having said that, I must admit that my favourite stories of all were the M. John Harrison ones that you carried in your early issues. The most interesting author introduced to me by *Interzone* is probably Greg Egan. — **Martin Haynes**, Uttoxeter, Staffs.

The balance of articles vs fiction is about right (higher than most other sf magazines). The idea of bibliographies is good. Personally, I would prefer longer stories. The novella is my favourite length. With six stories in an issue, it is like having a selection of six entrées instead of a balanced meal. Finally, a plea for my favourite authors: articles on, or interviews with, Michael Bishop and Judith Moffett would be appreciated. — Illegible signature, Norway (?).



I like all your reviewers. They are both entertaining and informative. High standard maintained. – **Gus Smith**, Hebden Bridge, W. Yorkshire.

The non-fiction is almost uniformly strong. One plea: when Samuel R. Delany's next novel eventually comes out, please make sure that John Clute reviews it at length. That should sort the men from the boys, as it were. I do like a challenging review, and Mr Clute likes to do books justice. – **Michael Sandy**, Luton.

Commenting on the lucidity (not John Clute) and the brevity (not Paul McAuley) of your book-review section, I personally feel you need to take the scalpel to these and cut away the excess verbiage... Although sometimes I don't care for some of the non-fiction, or fiction for that matter, I'd like to thank you for what *Interzone* does provide, and that's a feeling of community and continuity – and that is something that fiction on its own will never manage. So, more power to your elbow. – **Paul Fraser**, Aberdeen.

The non-fiction items I've enjoyed have been the Bob Shaw special – especially Shaw's own article on how to write sf, and the bibliography – but what a dreadful interviewer was thrust upon him! He coped remarkably well considering. The Douglas Adams interview was good, and Colin Greenland too. I always enjoy "Mutant Popcorn" and the newly-received book listings, but most of the book reviews are too long – John Clute and Mary Gentle are too boring. Wendy Bradley and Paul McAuley are too self-opinionated. "Ansible Link" is an important column, but is in danger I feel of becoming a David Langford self-hype club. – **Andrew G. Stephenson**, Newhaven, E. Sussex.

I do look forward to receiving *IZ* each month. Although I'm just an uneducated, boring, unemployed, country housewife, I prefer *Interzone* to *Woman's Realm* any day (ha ha!). – **Angela Dobinson**, Melbury Bubb, Dorchester.

I always enjoy readers' letters. No matter what kind of magazine or newspaper you read, the letters page is always one of the most interesting pages. – **Bob Doel**, no address given.

The quality of *Interzone* has been extremely high this year, which makes it difficult to pick out things I disliked. However, a touch more conservatism seems to have come with this consistency. How about letting standards slip a little and shocking us occasionally? My main complaint is that there hasn't been a single story from Lee Montgomery. Get her weaving! – **T.J. Mason**, Halifax.

Jane's favourite stories: "Pacing the Nightmare" by Sean McMullen, "She-Devil" by Diane Mapes, "No Sense of Humour" by Ian Lee, "The Steel" by Mary A. Turzillo. Sylv's favourite stories: "Children of a Greater God" by Julian Flood, "Mothmusic" by Sarah Ash, "The Sculptor" by Garry Kilworth. Nothing we actively disliked. Weren't that interested in "SQPR," but that's 'cos we're not interested in football. Jane's not enamoured of famous-people-in-alternative-time-line stories (James Joyce, USSA). May your chocolate-chip cookies never crumble. – **Jane & Sylv**, London.

Stories I liked: Paul Di Filippo, "Destroy All Brains!"; Ian McDonald, "The Best and the Rest of James Joyce"; Diane Mapes, "Nesting"; David Garnett, "Off the Track." Special mention for Nick Lowe. His column is always good, and often wonderful: *IZ* 55 and 64 were classics. Give the man an Oscar! John Clute continues to write reviews which are often better than the books. Wendy Bradley's TV column and book reviews are superb. David Langford's "Ansible Link" is irrelevant, silly and quite pointless. I love it. More, please! – **Les Bessant**, Gateshead, Tyne & Wear.

One recent change I do appreciate: the reviews of non-fiction books about science. Keep it up. They generate at least as much interesting writing and comment as the fiction reviews. – **Duncan Hedderley**, Wantage, Oxon.

I never look at "UK Books Received" and am hardly interested in the bibliographies of individual authors. I hardly ever look at the film reviews, and am not very interested in the TV reviews. Nor do I have much interest in sf conventions and gossip. I look at the book reviews, but there are too many and some are too long. The occasional reviews of science non-fiction books do not interest me much because I have seen them reviewed elsewhere. The letters are sometimes interesting, but many are too long and I see no point in those that take the form of reviews of stories that I have already read. I would have no objection to a somewhat slimmer magazine, with the non-fiction pruned drastically. – **Laurie Jones**, Beckenham, Kent.

My two favourite stories were "Epsilon Dreams" (Eric Brown) and "The Message from Mars" (J.G. Ballard). I was also impressed with "The Careperson" (Graham Joyce) and "The Sculptor" (Garry Kilworth). The best non-fiction was Paul McAuley's book reviews. The best artwork was easily Jim Burns ("The Tiger Sweater," issue 66). I was also impressed by Jason Hurst's pictures in general. – **Andy Gibbons**, no address given.

Despite the crap title, Aldiss's "Softly – As in an Evening Sunrise" was easily the best story you published last year, but I guess not many people will agree with that. And it must be said that although no one does breasts better than Kevin Cullen, Jason Hurst (issue 56) easily outclasses him (issue 59) when it comes to buttocks. Thanks for all the fun – if I liked everything in *IZ* I'd probably stop subscribing. – **M. Bould**, Plymouth.

In general, *IZ*'s artwork seems markedly less adventurous than its fiction, and, though most of it is adequate, little of it strikes me as enjoyable for its own sake. The covers seem especially conservative, and could have adorned almost any sf magazine for the last 30 years or so. I realize there may be sound commercial reasons for this, and if they help boost sales, all well and good, though I'm not sure they reflect the contents of the book. Still, so what? I obviously don't buy it for the pictures anyway. – **Tim Lees**, Manchester.

The covers were without exception good and distinctive. Those liked best were the SMS cover (58) and the Mark Harrison painting (65). Those queried are the Tony Roberts (62) and Kevin Cullen (57) – not for any lack of expertise but because the strong, almost exclusive, hardware emphasis tends falsely to stereotype the magazine in the direction of "old-fashioned" sf. I can see however that these can be magazine-shelf sales eyecatchers. – **K.V. Bailey**, Alderney.

Best illustration: SMS for "Priest of Hands." Also very good: Gerry Grace for "Horse Meat," and some Iain Byers. But there was lots of true grot among this year's illustrations. – **Dr Liz Robinson**, East Grinstead.

Keep up the good work with great fiction. Issue 58, the anniversary issue, was particularly good with the attraction of a Ballard story and convinced me to buy the magazine on a regular basis. I enjoy all the non-fiction features, especially the annotated bibliographies and the interviews. Particularly liked the Garry Kilworth interview, the Lawrence Sutin interview [on Philip K. Dick] and the Paul Park interview. – **Noel Megahy**, Belfast.

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